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Strange Encounters: Four Stories of God, Silence, Loss, and Cougars

Charles Emanuil Noyes
Bard College, cn8920@bard.edu

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Bard

Strange Encounters:
Four Stories of God, Silence, Loss, & Cougars

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages & Literature
of Bard College

by

Charles Noyes

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

“People were not kind. They did not put themselves in the place of someone like Star who had everything against her.”

—Flannery O’Connor

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A Humble Life

I

When my folks talked about seeing God and hearing the voices of the angels I always thought they were making it up so I'd go to Church. I never actually believed like I believe now. What I didn't know is that with some experience came uncertainty and with more experience came desire. My desire was finally fulfilled the day I fully accepted my religion. I do believe I saw God. He came to me in my darkest hour. Was it the God that created us in seven days? probably not, but it was my God. I don't know what *He* looks like, but He has a great voice—though He's a real chatterbox (but don't tell Him I said that).

“Hey! Veronica! Aren't you looking nice today,” he loved to start out with a compliment. Such a sweet talker, “Veronica, things are gonna be alright. You hear me? Now I know your life's gone crazy and you're off on your own, but the world's got more to offer you than just heartbreak and pain. You listen to me, ever you should need a friend in these troubling times, I want you to look no further than the sky. Look towards the sky and I'll be there, Veronica. I'll be looking down on you and your baby boy—oh shoot! I wanted that to be a surprise. Well, just act like you didn't hear that. Our little secret. I'll tell you what, if you can find the strength within you—with my help and the love of your son carrying you forward—if you can find that strength then I will find a place for you up here in the sky. If you can get away from Daniel and find a way to live the rest of your life—no matter how hard—and raise that baby into a wholesome young

man, then I promise you we will be together, forever and always. Best of luck, you're in your own hands now!"

My baby is a strange one. He likes when I watch *The Price is Right* in the motel room off of Route Seventy. He kicks every time Bob Barker says, "Come on down!" I leave the show on for him, even when I'm not watching it, even when I'm just looking out the window—sipping on some tea—thinking about how far we are from home. We left on July 1st when the weather was nice enough to hitchhike all the way out to Topeka by the 3rd. I feel a swell of nausea (maybe I should have eaten something before the tea) and his kicks only make it worse. I turn off the TV and think in its absence. All I have left has made it into this room. All I have left is within me or in my hastily packed bag. A bag that contains little to nothing of the life I once lived. Yesterday, I got a call from Daniel. I knew there was no way to avoid him. He spoke frantically, telling me shocking things I couldn't understand. I asked God for strength and told Daniel to go to Hell. I think I'm going to be sick so I stumble into the bathroom where I vomit semi-digested veggie lasagna and thick streams of bile. This becomes a ritual repeated every couple of hours until I know something is wrong, until I feel the water between my legs, and I realize I should've left a few days earlier.

II

The windows of a police cruiser roll down on July 4th and a young officer with a callous brow calls my name—my eyes widen. When the slightly older officer with sunken cheeks and eyes made invisible by opaque shades opens the door and starts towards me, I run. It's a foolish choice, one I would tell my child never to make, but I run, one hand

pressed firmly against my belly. I run as fast as my swollen pregnant legs can manage through the Main Street parade. Amidst the chattering mass of bodies I tumble through time, carrying both my own weight and the weight of my unborn child, using the pendulous energy of our combined strength to batter my way out and into a secluded alley.

I lose the cops, but I also lose myself. I never do well in crowds. My anxiety becomes severely heightened in the bustle; I believe I have some mild form of Agoraphobia (this is purely a self-diagnosis and not medically verified) that comes out like a wave when I am subjected to large groups of unknown people. My doctors told me it could be psychological, but it doesn't feel psychological. Running back into the crowd, my vision becomes a blur, my thoughts scatter in all directions, it feels as though my throat will close. This brief exertive moment is enough to fully deplete my weakened pregnant strength, another decision I would tell my child not to make. I hear the cops and other people shouting from all directions, I hear children crying, tubas discharging, birds tittering, then the sky opens up and shines down upon me and I'm free, taking with me all I can ever hope to redeem. I cry the Yellow River Flood. I cry the ocean's most destructive waves and its churning depths. I feel the crushing pressure and stress building up inside of me so I throw up all over the cracked grey sidewalk, right by a family of five who watch me, aghast, with a gaze full of pity. I know I'm going to die, it hurts so much.

God has a really great sense of humor about the whole thing. He says, "You've done a great job so far Veronica, but I saw you. I've seen your breach of morality." He gives me an impish little smile, like a child's. "But you know I'm here for you, love,

though if I were you, I'd be looking for a job soon. Maybe head out West, they got good schools out there. You take care now." I'm paraphrasing of course, but He really has such a way with words. Like my father, He can jeremiad all day and night, but it fills me with such calm. His voice just flows into me, like a mug of hot chocolate or a day by the ocean. He makes the twenty-six hours a little easier to where it only feels like twenty-five. Once the floodgates open and the baby is declared masculine, alive, and in good health, Doctor Evans asks me what I want to name my new little boy. I'm far too exhausted to tell him anything but the full truth so I say, "Doctor, I spoke with God and He told me what to name my child. He told me, 'Veronica! Listen to me Veronica; you have to name your child something unique. Something special so that people will know him personally without knowing his face or where this boy comes from. This child, like you, he comes from dirt, but that's not where he's headed, oh no. I know exactly where he's going, and I know exactly how his life is going to change. He's going to be successful and have a great job and call you every night, or at least twice a week. Best of all, he's going to be a humble gentleman, a real handsome family man, so that's what I want you to name him. Call him Humble Sullivan, and don't even think twice about it.'

So that's what I want to name him, doctor; Humble Sullivan."

III

Cold skin draws me back, a creeping whisper along my hips. His hot breath answered my touch, took me in closer 'til the world around us disappeared. Our sweat commingled into a collective pool. Along with our branded musks, the scent of mutual lust emanated from our bodies, intertwining with the juniper lightly wafting from some candles. His voice flowed into me, but I was in another place and too distant to hear. I

was entrenched in the embrace of our rhythm, too entwined to see our surroundings or the moisture collecting and cooling under my back. Everything there was so real and vivid, like a painting that brought me to another place, but at the same time obscured in a waking dream. He told me what to do, where to go, what to say. After a while I blew a soft bubble between us, kept us afloat in that duplicity, but we separated and could not be found. We lay awake in that dark cave—illuminated by the candles—while we watched the drawings around us come alive and taunt our affection. He doesn't know how his touch served its purpose, my purpose. He thinks I am weak. He left and then I sat alone, in the afterglow of our secret.

IV

Humble and I make our way out West. I get him all the way to Los Angeles before he turns one, silently passing by the many static lives. While Humble's soul and his heart develop rapidly, his right ear is underdeveloped, only partially functioning and overly sensitive. All he has is an earhole and some gnarled bits of cartilage surrounding it. The doctor said he would be fine, that the gruesomeness of his deformity was mostly cosmetic and to fix it would cost more than I could possibly afford. God, there's only so much we can take. This burden is ours to bear, I know that and we will bear it, but please give us a sign that you're still out there. We have to communicate if we are going to get through this. I talk to him in both ears, but I can't tell if there's a difference. This will be an obstacle that he must learn to surmount; it will make the rest of him stronger. I'd give him both of my ears if it would help.

He rarely cries, he always laughs when we play together, and he never seems to notice his aural deficiency, though of course everyone else does. Mothers and fathers

and children alike whisper, stare, glance, and try any way they can to get a peek without me noticing, but I don't care. All they see is a child born more pure than they could ever imagine. God has given me my second chance (probably my only second chance), and as long as I look out for Humble, God will look out for me like my mother tried, but never could. I'm hurtling down the emergency lane towards a solid barrier. But I leave this feeling behind—push yourself forward now, everything will pass, goodness will come to be and the light will bring you salvation. Every day it feels like I'm drowning.

Humble doesn't take his medicine. I'm afraid to force it on him, but it's for his own good. I tell him this and he throws it all up on me. This is the first of my breakdowns and it happens in the third rest stop bathroom along the way.

LA isn't suitable to Humble for whatever reason. The clouds are too thick, the streets are too clean, the rent is too high. There are too many things to complain about. I can hardly understand this child, but what can I do? Humble doesn't want the best, which means I can't want the best either.

V

I find a job and a small, furnished place in Tacoma, nothing special, just a waitressing gig at a Greek diner. Olympus Diner, funny enough, is the name. I ask why not Tacoma diner or something more unassuming (the name just seems a bit...undeserved is all), but they don't answer my questions. I'm the only one amused by the pitiful joke of a restaurant that has become my life. I shouldn't say it's not special; the owners are a pair of Greek immigrants, Nicholaos and Sofia Mavros, who've run the

place since 1976. They're both very unhappy people who hardly acknowledge my presence amidst the gradual churn of transaction that seems to continue unceasingly until closing time. I add nothing to their world other than another name to write checks to every Friday, which is a suitable arrangement for all of us. The other workers usually keep to themselves, but they're approachable and friendly enough to offer me advice. They share brief scenes from their lives, little scenarios that elicit sympathy and bring the end of the shift closer without disrupting the business crawl. Gloria's story of the same cop pulling her over three times in the past year is a perfect example of this type of vacant (no-room-for-disagreement) sermon. All cops in this town are corrupt if you're to believe her, but by the end of her story you begin to question her innocence. The roof in the kitchen drips so the Mavros's put a red plastic bucket underneath and tell me to empty it every hour. I'd ask them why they don't just fix the roof, but my questions tend to float in place like moisture in the suffocating humidity.

"The City of Destiny" they call it. In a way, it does feel like destiny, or it's my punishment. Either way, I'm here, Humble's here, Humble's happy, I'm stuck, everything's fine. I push my way past a group of obese middle-aged women chattering in their booth. Their girth extends out into my path and I fall, spilling hot coffee all over my chest and arms. No amount of apologies or tiny napkins erases the searing pain. The coffee is heated to just under 200 degrees Fahrenheit, ensuring maximum freshness for maximum length for our picky customers. This leads to second and third degree burns along my sternum and ribs causing me to pass out. The wounds cling to my skin like unwanted tattoos. I'm released from the hospital after a few days, but I still carry the scars, reminders of the life I can't leave behind because I've already left my first one

behind and my head hurts all the time and the only thing keeping me going is ten milligrams of OxyContin every four hours.

It's been a year. Every night I pray for God to speak to me again.

VI

My name is Lisa Sanderson now for legal purposes and Humble's my only accomplice. Humble doesn't hear so well. I've been using a natural homeopathic garlic remedy inserted directly into his ear canal and it seems to help with the infections. "Thank God he's got another one on the other side," is what I tell the other moms, but they can see through me. The embarrassment of having to put garlic in my child's ear. My burns healed about as well as one could hope, but they'll never disappear entirely. They're discolored in all the wrong places, raised like a mess of vines underneath my skin. Sometimes I shudder when I look at them. I still can't believe they're my arms, my chest. I cover them up as much as possible, avoiding the horrible truth. Humble and I get each other through every day, even though God has abandoned us. I would be bitter if I had the energy, but Humble's supposed to be talking by now and all he's managed to say is "Blah." He saves his lexicon for when I cook for him, refusing to eat much of anything except for Gerber's Baby Carrot Mash. I think I'm hallucinating as his fingers start to assume an orange tint. I try to wean him off of the carrots, but he rejects my cooking favoring the Goddamn Gerber's like they're the ones who pushed him out of their uterus. I trust God, but He's been awfully quiet these past few years. I'm just happy Humble still talks to me. This mission is proving to be harder than I expected.

A year.

“Humble, please stop.”

A year.

“Don’t go into that, it might be dangerous.”

A year.

“Humble, why do you always look at me that way? You make me feel like a monster when you look at me like that, Stop It!”

A yearning for this uncatchable feeling taunting me from the backseat of a sedan driving 68 in a 40 zone. I slam on the brakes as time collapses and my eyes turn blood red.

I would bring Humble to the park every week, if possible. There, we could sit and have a pleasant conversation and he would tell me how things were going at school and I would tell him about my day at work. We would sit under a sky-bound oak tree, absorbing the sun in our lavish encampment. We’d smile and laugh and Humble would be a little gentleman and clean everything up and then we would stroll around, looking at the birds and the trees and feeling that disingenuous sense of refreshment that only a metropolitan park can offer. We would escape together—for this ephemeral moment—and walk towards the sky in the brilliant gleam. And we would know what was awaiting us down the road, past our abandoned bivouac, concealed within the bushes and the ungainly trails.

VII

My toes unfurl as I pick grains of sand out from between them. The sky is mostly clear—there are a few stratus clouds scattered in the distance, but they’re just for show. I lather more SPF 90 onto my arms. Though my natural skin tone is a shade darker than pale, today’s sun is unrelenting. It’s been a lovely day; the water was tepid, though quite refreshing as the beach tends to be when you’re recovering from several cold, rainy (we never had rain like this back home), hard-worked months. There are children crying, left unsupervised they manage to drop their ice cream in the sand and terrorize each other to the point of tears. I’m here alone, not because I want to be, but because Humble doesn’t think going to the beach with his mother is “cool.” The smell of ocean salt distracts me from the ongoing chaos in my periphery; it even manages to distract me from my own head, if just for a moment. If only every day could be a beach day, we’d get nothing done, but only because we’d be drowning in our own happiness. I guess that’s why all those New Yorkers move to the Bahamas or Cancun. What’s there to worry about, really, when every day is beach day...

I think things will get better, and they do, to a certain extent. Years go by, and I don’t even realize. But some drag on and I look at the calendar in March wondering how much time is left ‘till Christmas. High School is a lot to handle for Humble, as are the trials of puberty. No matter how many times I tell him that things will get better and how everybody has to go through the tension and angst to build character and become a better person, he refuses to believe me. He doesn’t believe that life in Tacoma will ever change and when we talk, I believe him despite the fact that it was he who suggested we

move here in the first place. I ask if God has ever spoken to him like He's spoken to me and Humble averts his gaze and rushes to his room.

VIII

I used to spend so much of my free time looking at baby photos, old snapshots that we took along the way with our disposable camera. Now I don't even know what I do. I have my work, I have the Lord, and I have Humble. After the accident, God came to me in my sorrow. I was unable to think lucidly with all the painkillers, unable to take care of myself after tending to Humble first and unconditionally. But God saw my sacrifice. They always tell you that God will come in your darkest moments to show you the light, and He did. He told me how great a job I was doing raising Humble, how beautiful my self-sacrifice was. He told me I am a charitable person and my life has meaning and value. He told me that what I do for Humble is the best thing a mother can do for her son. He said that though I have already sacrificed so much, there's a lot more pain and work in my future if I want to truly earn a place by his side. I understood His words, internalizing them, though his manner of delivery confused me as always. I asked Him what are we supposed to do now? He said, "Well darling, I say you should go where your heart has pushed you all along: Seattle, Washington. Find a better life there, I know it's the right path for you."

These years are lived well, but time etches its fingers through my skin. We've struggled to connect these few weeks, but I take his hand to show my love. "It isn't alright for us to run away like this," he tells me, but his remarks are lost along with the rest of the fragments we've left behind. The solitary truth fueling our departure is

emptiness. There was simply nothing for us in Tacoma, no future. The world gave us little, but we carry what we have with us, finding new light in the days ahead.

IX

We take our seats at the front so we can look onward, through the fog, at our destination approaching. Humble mumbles something about falling asleep. I try to tell him about an article I read online that said the moment you decide to sleep your brain begins to unravel like a roll of toilet paper and ends up running even faster than normal. While he pretends to sleep, I look over at the other passengers on the 11:25 PM bus to Seattle. There are only two other kids, one of whom is adopted because she's Asian and the parents are White. Good for them that their parental instinct is so effusive that it extends to children birthed by strangers in another continent, while their own flesh and blood sits right next to them. My thoughts are interrupted by a bump in the uneven road. The bus driver is reckless and unrestrained, hitting the bump at almost 60 MPH. The biological-looking child has to hold on to the seat in front of her to steady herself. There is a man seated two rows behind them whose face is concealed by his hat and the darkness of the bus. His coat reminds me of one I bought for Daniel, couldn't have been more than a few weeks before we left him. He sits by the aisle with his leg sticking awkwardly out from under his seat, almost fully obstructing the way to the bathroom like a downed tree impeding passage on a road. His somber presence is unnerving so I look at the man seated three rows behind him on the other side. He's a commuter judging by his grey briefcase, and poor judging by his frayed jacket and hat, but he happily hums a folksy tune.

This uncomfortable group buzzes up the I-5 at 63 MPH. I don't know where these other people come from, but they look weary, like the people in photographs of the Great Depression. We had traveled along the barren interstate for around twenty minutes when Humble leans over to me and whispers,

“Mom, I have to pee.”

“I told you not to drink so much lemonade at the terminal. Make it quick, we only have about 15 more minutes ‘till we get there.”

As Humble scoots around me and walks down the narrow aisle, the bus suddenly brakes to avoid a broken tree branch on the road. Humble stumbles and grabs on to one of the convenient handrails. As the driver smacks his horn in a fit of misplaced anger, Humble collides with mysterious passenger's leg.

Sensing Humble's discomfort, I blurt out, “Sorry about that, sir” as Humble bumps into the man's leg again. The man shifts in his seat, unveiling his petrifying face. His eyes are yellowed and crusty, his lips sagging and worn. He could be anywhere from 40-70 years old. Humble looks away sheepishly; wearing his guilt and embarrassment in equal measures, and tries to hurriedly avoid the man's leg. The man's face is a contorted mass of anger and self-hatred bearing no resemblance to the calm indifference one looks for in a stranger. He grabs Humble by the arm before he can get away. Everything he does now is illuminated by the fear in Humble's face.

“Are you just gonna let your mother apologize for you like that?” the man asks Humble, his voice cracked and seething.

“Let my son go!” I try to stand up, yelling on his behalf.

“I'm s-sorry...” But his attempted reconciliation is unsuccessful. I've never seen Humble this afraid. I wish I could just go over and explain that this man isn't angry with

him, he's angry at the world, at his own circumstances. He's taking out his putrid aggression on my poor child, unaware of the damage he's causing. I would instruct Humble to simply ignore this negative man, to shake him off, turn away, and go on with his own life, for this man is too far gone to save and the world is full of men like him. But this is not the right time or place for this conversation.

"Oh come on! Don't tell me you're sorry; tell it to your Goddamn mother who's doing everything she can for you. Do you want this poor woman to apologize for you the rest of your life? Go on, tell her!"

Humble is pale and shaking in place. The man must be intoxicated, spewing arrogance and relishing his chance to flaunt his aggression.

"Sorry mom," he says as quickly as possible.

"It's okay baby, go pee. This man and I are going to talk."

With that, Humble squirms away to go relieve himself. I shift my way over to this man and sit in the seat in front of him, turning my body all the way around to face his grotesque features.

"What? He bumped into me and didn't say a fucking thing, he made you apologize for him." There's sweat forming along the side of his face and he frequently repositions himself so he can look down on me. The man's sneer is almost carnivorous with his yellow canine slightly visible and his tongue scraping against his teeth. I let him simmer in this state, playing off of his anger. I know there's nothing he can do or say that could affect me.

"You don't know my son, just like you don't know me and we don't know you. Now I don't know why an innocent bump has made you so angry, but you clearly have no idea what you're talking about. My son has been taught to do the right thing with

God's help. He's my boy and he's all I have left in the world!" I feel my eyes tighten and close, waiting for him to disappear. With his image blacked out, it's easier to berate him. It's easier to confront his aggression and combat it equally.

"You really are sad," he says shaking his head, "I hate to break it to you lady, but God's dead and your son ain't Jesus. Nobody's gonna save you, nobody's gonna save me, and you're *all* damned to Hell," he yells, directing his venom at the entire bus.

"How dare you..." I begin. I take a few paces forward, planting myself firm against the rocking bus, "Look at you. You're pathetic. You smell, your face looks like you haven't washed it in years, your clothes are dirty. You're nothing is what you are, absolutely nothing. God gave up on you a long time ago—"

At this moment, Humble emerges from the bathroom to witness us grappling in the middle of the bus. With the stranger's arm locked around mine we stumble together onto the floor, like a couple lumbering into bed after a night of dancing.

"Get the fuck off me you cretin!" I yell through tears.

"Gruh fuff!" he yells in reply, his mouth latched around my jacket.

"Get off of her!" Humble screams as he tears the man off of me. The bus is now stopped on the outskirts of Seattle in a lonely industrial part of the city. The other passengers are helping us to our feet while the bus driver yells vague instructions and profanities, simultaneously reciting maximum jail sentences for assaulting a bus driver. I feel like a distant observer, silently watching the madness play out. Outside the bus, there are trees stooped over us, looking down on us. Inside, my body simply reacts to my assailant, disassociated to the events occurring around me.

We wonder how these two civilized people are on top of each other, biting, scratching, and fighting like animals. Humble is so scared; he can't believe we've come

to this. It's okay Humble, everything's going to be okay. Let mommy take care of you Humble, you have no idea how much joy and happiness you bring me every day.

Apologizing for you and breaking a man's nose is the least I can do. Oh Humble, there are a lot of people out there like this sad unfortunate man. I just hope my boy can figure out which ones are good and which ones aren't. But this is his burden now; I've done what I can. I passed this burden of life onto him long ago—all we can do now is wait for salvation. You probably haven't even realized the entire world's out there waiting for you, Humble. You just have to take the first step on your own.

The Quiet Room

The first time I spoke with Dr. Orfield, I had just broken my father's heart. It wasn't the first time I'd disappointed him and he'd returned the favor many times. But my first thought when I stepped off that plane had nothing to do with Dr. Orfield or my father. It had nothing to do with silence or noise or anything related to my field. All I felt was remorse because I was out in Minnesota in late January without a jacket. Something told me to turn back and it wasn't just the cold. The entire aura of the Midwest; the artificial layout of the farms, the mall of America, the abnormally slow gait of those with too much time, it just simply does not appeal to me. I doubt I'll ever go back. It leaves me with a peculiar sensation of sticking in time like flypaper, unable to move forward.

I was greeted at the gate by Dr. Talbot, pronounced Tall-bow, who introduced herself with a flattering smile and a dainty handshake. She just kind of stuck her bony hand out limp for me to grasp. Very odd woman. She was petite and curly-haired and always seemed distracted by something invisible. Unwieldy, I think, is the right word.

"Talbot? That's French, right?"

"Yes, Jewish on my mother's side. Delighted to meet you," she said, still flashing that bewitching smile.

"Nice to meet you too, I'm John. Please don't call me Johnny."

"Oh I wouldn't dare. It's too cartoonish."

"Hah! I appreciate that. Too many people just burst right out with it. They don't even ask."

"Can't be too pleasant having to scold them on first contact. I'm Juliet, the lab's psychologist."

“Really? A psychologist. I was hoping I’d be able to discuss Room 116 with someone.”

“Well you can ask Dr. Orfield when you meet him. I may not know much about the room’s specifications but feel free to consult with me whenever you wish...” I was visibly shivering at that point.

“Sorry to waste your time doctor, but you see, I’m quite ill-prepared for the weather. You think there’s a place here I can purchase a jacket? I’d rather not step outside without one.”

“Of course! I’d be delighted to help you pick out something. I think there’s an outlet around here.”

I did not turn back that day because, for some unknown reason, I thought I was deliberately fated to see my stay in Minnesota out to its conclusion. I had been so lucky just to be in that airport in the first place.

“What about this one?” she said, holding up a bright-red North Face puffer, “It has the inner down layer that will really make the difference.”

“Looks as good as any, I’ll take it.” She’d clearly been in Minnesota longer than I, so I deferred to her judgment. I really just wanted to see Mr. Orfield and get in the room, so my thoughts were far from the style of my new jacket.

I’m usually not one for calling strangers out off the blue, but I didn’t have many other options. It was right after the holidays and because of my father I was stuck in The Netherlands with nowhere else to go. Calling Minnesota, I was surprised to hear a mellow Southern accent coated in a layer of static.

“Is this Dr. Orfield?”

“I would certainly hope so,” he said in measured exuberance, “My intern told me this couldn’t wait.”

“And it can’t. My name’s John and I discovered your lab from an article, the CNN one. Is there any chance you’d be willing to discuss your facility?”

“You’re losing me, I’m very busy right now,” his voice boomed, even when he sighed, “What can I tell you, kid?”

I couldn’t stand his infantilization, “Yes, you see, I’m in a bit of a dire situation right now and I would cherish the opportunity to come work for you. I don’t know how your team does it, but you know how to get results,” I stammered, trying to hold myself together.

“You’re too kind. Unfortunately, I don’t foresee any open positions at this time. I’ll let you know if something comes up, but, keep at it, keep hanging in there—”

“I understand, sir,” I said, wishing I could make the direness of my situation more apparent, “Uh, the quietest room in the world, huh...you must get calls like this all the time. I’m a little shocked, really, how simple it was to achieve your sound-suppression levels. I can’t believe no one had managed anything like this before.”

“Well, none of it would have been possible without a lot of hard work from a list of other facilities, so it’s difficult to claim ownership over such an award. Being the first, we’re probably not gonna be the best, but you have to accept these things.”

“I’m sorry to admit, I must have read that article about a hundred times by now,” It wasn’t an understatement, my search history contained almost every website that even mentioned the lab, “One thing is still bothering me about it.”

“And what might that be?”

“The article mentioned that nobody’s ever been able to last more than 45 minutes in the room. I’m having a bit of trouble understanding why. I feel if I were in there, I could last hours. It would be quite peaceful, no?” What I wouldn’t have done to be a part of that team. I’d been craving better colleagues ever since I’d made my name with a group of some of the most intelligent people in my field during my graduate studies. We’d developed a top-of-the-line reverb simulation software based on real-world audio interactions. It had easily overshadowed everything I’d done before and since, but it was probably the only reason Dr. Orfield had continued to talk with me.

“That’s a Hell of a claim,” he said, livening his tone, “I set that record myself, you know?”

“No, I didn’t know that sir. I’m not trying to diminish your achievements—“

“Oh don’t worry, I took no offense. It does sound easy. What’s an hour or two in a quiet room? Have you ever been in an anechoic chamber? It can hardly be described, the feeling of sound working against you like that. Terrifies a lot of people...”

“Really? I find them quite fascinating. I used the one at the university lab often.”

“I tell you, you may think they’re fascinating now, but when you start thinking and your mind starts wandering, let me tell you. Couple years ago I had to get one of those heart valves, a little ball in a cage keeping me alive, you ever seen one? Anyway, in 116 all I could hear was my heart valve wheezing. On and off, on and off. Just sitting there thinking and this thing’s clicking away, pushing the blood through my heart. It was therapeutic for about five minutes and then it became totally unbearable.”

The man was one for rambling, that much I would never deny, but he was one of the smartest people I’d ever met, “That sounds like a nightmare, thankfully I still have all my original valves.”

“Right you are about that, you should keep it that way. You’re still young, you got your health. You mentioned college; so you’re an academic type.”

“Not exactly, I have a PHD, and I just recently completed a fellowship at the University of Oregon, but I hoping to end my interment in academia there, if possible.”

“And why’s that? You sound suited to it. You’re a Yankee, unless I’m mistaken, which I never am.”

“Boston, yes. And it’s been a bit of overkill, sir. I’ve toiled away at the universities long enough to see how much money they throw around. Not to mention the kind of work they had us doing, I mean, they had us engineering bleed-free binaural speakers. It just couldn’t be done on a shoestring budget. Meanwhile we’re doing calculations on Apple II’s.”

“Hehe, you got quite the mouth on you there.”

“Thank you, sir,” At the time I wasn’t quite sure how much of his vernacular was in jest and how much of it was genuine, “Maybe you can’t help me Dr. Orfield, maybe I don’t even know what I want myself. All I know is I can’t go back to that, not again.”

“And you certainly have confidence, too. I’m starting to like you, you remind me a lot of myself when I was an angry young man itching to make a change. If someone’s gonna try to beat my record, I don’t think I’d mind it being you. You should know, it weren’t easy. You gotta be tough, gotta have grit. You think you have that in you?”

“Sure, I mean, I’m not quite sure what you mean, but I know you have your man right here,” the phone practically shook out of my hands, “I was hoping this call would serve as an example of how prepared I am to join your team. I want to beat every record you throw my way.”

“Well, we’ll find some grit in you yet. Why don’t you send over your résumé. We may have some use for you out here, after all.”

“That sounds wonderful, sir. Although...that may be a little difficult as I’m overseas at the moment and I’m almost certain my father has cancelled my flight back to the US, if you can believe that.”

“Family troubles, huh?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“Well, you better book another one.”

“I can’t really afford another one right now, but if I can scrounge enough money in the next couple weeks—“

“We’ve got some money left in the budget over here, don’t you worry about that.”

“You can’t be serious Dr. Orfield? I couldn’t possibly accept—”

“Oh I always am Johnny, except right now, hehehe.” His laugh reminded me of the leaking wheeze of an overweight sportscaster, the kind of infectious generosity I needed at that moment. His eccentricity was undeniable, but the man could make anything interesting, he just had that indescribable quality that left you awaiting his next word. All I knew was that he’d designed the world’s quietest room and he wanted me to help him test it’s silence.

When I say it’s the quietest room in the world, few people really understand what I mean. The room itself actively persecutes sound the second it leaves your mouth, beating it down into the floor, absorbing it through the jagged foam walls and spitting it out God knows where. This is apparent the moment you step in the room. Sound dissipates instantaneously—so quickly it really can’t be called sound at all. It takes

whatever sound is left and presses it into the air around you; the air you're breathing is full of these unanswered echoes, dissipating ghosts of noise. Then suddenly, they're gone. They disappear completely and you're left in the room, alone and searching for a reflection of yourself that's somewhere just out of reach. This is the overwhelming power of silence.

I've held an interest in sound from an early age. My field; acoustics, is closer to the study of waves than sound. It's a physical thing, sound, not many people realize. Governments around the world use sound-based weapons for crowd control that emit a paralyzing wave to harmlessly subdue large groups. I was in Eugene studying reverberation and echoes, my specialty, which to many people mean the same thing. It's true; they describe the same phenomenon. They both describe how sound is reflected or absorbed by physical objects, but the difference lies in time. With echoes, you hear your voice reflected back at you, but with a noticeable delay between the initial sound and the echo. The delay of reverberation is so negligible that instead of the environment repeating the initial sound, it either amplifies it or envelops it. We don't realize reverberation is even happening most of the time, but listening to Schubert's eighth in a concert hall and in my grandmother's basement yields noticeably different results.

I mention reverb because one of the first things my mother did when she entered my temporary room at the University of Oregon was shriek at the mess. The second thing she did was hand me an article she'd printed out from CNN. It was a profile on the Orfield Laboratory, referencing their Guinness World Record for engineering the quietest room in the world.

“This looks interesting, I think I remember hearing about it a few months ago,” I said, tossing it onto a pile of papers on my desk I had yet to touch.

“Of course he has. See, I told you,” I heard my father gripe from the hall where I couldn’t quite see him yet.

“Well you certainly seem to think you know him best,” I couldn’t watch them interact with each other so I tried to clear some space in my room. My mother stood in the entrance, “Look it over whenever you can dear, I’m sure you’ll find it interesting. Especially that man they interviewed, he reminded me of you. He’s a bit of an oddball, but the things he says about that room there—“

“She wouldn’t stop reading it to me on the plane,” my father interrupted as he poked his head around the threshold, “Kept putting it in my lap like I don’t have enough to read!”

My father skirted around my mother blocking the entrance. He was a stern man, skinny but stern. That was the man I knew, at least. Ask anybody who worked with him at the law firm and he was a funny, hardworking, decent man. But he was different when it came to his household, which he very much considered *his*. When he joked it was almost never around me and when he did, it was at my expense. I saw him glance at my room and my closet doors and I shuddered, moving swiftly to shove some of the mess away.

“I can assure you, dad, nothing fun has been going on in here. I only just finished those binaural speakers yesterday and I haven’t had time to clean up yet.”

“You hear that, honey, he’s too busy for us. He probably doesn’t even want us here in the first place.” He was acting even more childish than normal.

I sighed, “You’re right dad, and that’s exactly what I told mom over the phone.” If they’d come all this way just to treat me like I was ten again, then I was in for week of Hell. My dad puffed his chest as they both stood in the doorway, leaning in as though they were intruding on me. My mother’s eyes were wide, breaking from her complacent façade. That’s how I knew she was getting nervous. She knew when to expect an outburst from my father better than I did, her eyes signaling me like birds taking flight before a tsunami.

“We had to get on a plane and travel all the way across this country just to see you,” his head wavered from side to side, “The least you can do is not treat us like we’re a nuisance.”

“I’m sorry dad, you’re right,” I said diplomatically, “I’ve just been feeling so buried under all this work,” I sighed, “We’re good?” He stood adjacent to my mother, tucked away in the corner of the room, facing the center. He nodded and closed his eyes, attempting to repair what had already become a troubled evening.

“Anyways we also came with some good news to share with you. I was talking with some of the guys at the firm and Emilio, you remember Emilio? Tall, dark-haired fellow. Mexican, I think,” I nodded, “Well, he knew some guy who’s been working at Philips...”

“Philips? Really?” My father and I had discussed Philips as an ideal candidate for long-term stability.

My mother chimed, “It’s true! They want to give you an interview and fly you all the way to Europe! Isn’t it great!” She said, eyeing me frantically.

My dad stopped facing me and craned his neck to look at my mom. His eyes immediately darkened and isolated my mother, stoking the silence until it felt like he was never going to speak, “You interrupted me again.”

“Oh, I-I’m sorry. Frank, I just wanted him to know—“

“I was going to tell him! I got him the Goddamn interview, didn’t I?” He didn’t yell so much as pressured her to respond and challenge his authority, enunciating each word with excessive clarity.

“Oh!” she shuddered.

He let the silence speak for her, “Can you just wait outside? We’ve got to be getting to dinner soon.”

“Okay, dear...” she nodded and limped out, leaving the two of us glaring until finally we heard her shut the dorm’s front door.

“Dad, you didn’t have to—“

“No, I did,” he startled me, “She’s been like this the whole week!”

“She hasn’t seen me in six months!”

“And whose fault is that? You never come to visit us. What do you want me to do? You want me to be angry with you instead? Is that it? ‘Cause I can tell the Philips guy you’re not interested...”

“No, thanks dad. Really, thank you, I mean it.” He stretched out his hand over the threshold and I shook it, one arm in the room, one arm out in the hallway.

It wasn’t until after they left, while I was tidying my room, that I considered the article lying on my desk. My first inclination with these articles was usually to throw them away, but I’d kept this one. I thought it would make a nice bit of light reading for

the plane. The first line declared, **“The Quietest Place in the World is the Anechoic Test Chamber at Orfield Laboratories, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.”** The quietest room in the world.

It was shortly after the holidays that I left for The Netherlands to dedicate myself entirely to the interview, which was as guaranteed as they come, a formality really. They had my résumé, they’d spoken with my father, what was there left to discuss? The fellowship had kept me busy, but between term papers, performance reviews, and underfunded equipment, I was ready for a better use of my abilities. The feeling of 30 Hertz amplified where you can’t hear it so much as feel it in your bowels. The sight of a wine glass shattering; its resonant frequency tearing it apart from within. These were the experiments that had first interested me in sound, the kinds of powerful demonstrations that I’d craved from the fellowship. My father had found me what was my dream job in many ways. Though it would be uncomfortable living in his debt, it would satisfy my need for real-world results, it would justify all the hard work and time I’d spent earning my doctorate. All that was left was the interview.

I dressed, ate, shaved, and washed every part of my body, like a prized pig at the state fair. There were butterflies in my stomach, churning my breakfast as I watched the clock on my hotel dresser; I had an hour to get there, barring divine intervention. And just as I had packed my things to leave, that article caught my eye. It was crumpled, unfurled, and thrown onto a pile of clothes exploding from my suitcase, but nevertheless it rested on top. I picked it up and let it fall on the bed, curling and flipping in the air before landing with a crinkle. In that strange second of panicked, inevitable terror, I pulled out my cell phone, called the office at Philips headquarters, and cancelled the interview.

Instead of calling back and begging for a second chance, I called Minneapolis and asked for Dr. Orfield. And that was how I ended up stuck out at the Orfield Laboratories, eating my lunch in the rec area, when Dr. Talbot asked to sit next to me.

“Yeah, it’s fine with me, here,” I cleared some newspapers and journals I’d been reading and beckoned with my free hand to sit down.

She had a manner of speech that was similar to a Shepard tone illusion. Her pitch increased continuously, slowly filling the room until I’d realize I’d been clenching my fist or clamping my jaw.

“Listen, Doctor, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“Shoot away.” She slid into the chair next to me and placed her thermos, microwave chicken, and fresh pear down next to my things.

“I’ve been involved with several different acoustics labs in the past and, I mean to say, not that I don’t appreciate your being here,” I stumbled over my words, unsure why I was suddenly incoherent, “but in all the labs I’ve ever been I never thought there’d be a need for someone with a masters in psychology.”

She looked slightly taken aback, as if I had offended her even though I had purposely tried not to, “You’re right, I can see how my presence might be confusing. Particularly if you haven’t seen the room yet. But once you hear from Dr. Orfield I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“Well, I assumed it was similar to most anechoic chambers. Large foam pads, grooved wood walls, maybe a few mic stands and instruments,” I smiled.

“I don’t want to spoil anything for you, the tour should start soon. Just keep in mind, as I’m sure you’ve figured out that Mr. Orfield can be...a bit eccentric. And I say that from a place of love, the man’s also a genius.”

“Yes! Every time he talks I end up with a hundred more questions.”

“Well, I’ve only been here two, maybe three months now, but I can try to answer some of them.”

“That would be fantastic because I can’t seem to get a word out of Dr. Orfield about what it’s actually like to be in there. He mentioned that it was somewhat terrifying, but he gave no reason as to why. I’m starting to think that maybe I should—“ Orfield, as if reading my mind, burst through the rec room doors and shouted,

“Evening, ladies and gentleman. If the mood is right, then I ask all my young, beautiful associates to please join me in Room 116 at their earliest convenience.”

I turned to Dr. Talbot, “I guess that’s our cue,” but she had already begun down the hallway towards the room.

The door marked 116 led not to *the* room, but to the control room, a kind of “command center” that functioned as a threshold to the actual room. The whole place reeked of disinfectant, a lemony, acrid smell that burned in my nostrils. “So this is what we’re here for,” I remarked to nobody in particular.

That was when I noticed the plaque. It decreed the room’s record status in shining bronze, an exclamation point, a showstopper. “**The Quietest Place in the World is the Anechoic Test Chamber at Orfield Laboratories, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.**” The quietest place in the world had what looked to be dried glue or paint encrusting its plaque.

“I’m not sure exactly how long those Guinness people were left in there for, but it makes me want a beer just talking about it,” Orfield chuckled at his own jokes quite often, “Their measurements confirmed everything we already knew, now for the world to see,” Orfield said, directing his gaze towards each of us in turn, one after the other, like he was taking inventory of our faces and respective reactions. “None were interested in sticking around very long afterwards, but they’re weak minded, terribly disinterested. Not like our newest member,” he pointed to me, “That’s where John comes in.”

“Nowhere else on this planet can you be more deprived of your own senses than this little nine by nine closet that I’ve designed,” Orfield started, looking directly at me, “You enter through these two vault doors,” One of his lackeys pressed a button on the control panel and a metallic screeching—overwhelmingly loud and inappropriate for the world’s quietest space—consumed us. That screeching, grating clamor, in a few days’ time would be one of the most relieving sounds I would ever hear.

The name “Anechoic Chamber,” I assume still printed in bright yellow letters above the entrance, means echo-free, in that sound is suppressed the moment it enters the space. Any sounds created in the room have absolutely nothing to bounce off of, Orfield explained, giving them no way to be heard. “We achieve this through the use of three-foot thick fiberglass acoustic wedges on every wall including the floor and ceiling,” which gives the room the feeling of a Futurist geometrical cave with foam stalactites and stalagmites creeping in from every direction. I didn’t say this out loud, but claustrophobia was a serious concern. “Also,” he slapped the wall enthusiastically, “foot-thick concrete walls don’t hurt none.”

“And if you look here,” he said, now sweeping through the room, “the floor is made out of sturdy wire mesh with additional wedges underneath diminishing

reverberations, this is really the extra layer of sound absorption that won us the record,” while also giving the room the feeling of being trapped in a chicken coop suspended on top of a death trap. Actually, it feels more like a torture chamber than a recording studio. A torture chamber designed by Frank Gehry.

The world record for quietness recorded there was -9.4 dBA (decibels weighted for human frequency sensitivity), which is in the negative range of hearing. “Zero decibels does not mean zero sound!” as my Acoustics 1 teacher loved to hammer in, but rather it is the threshold of perfect infant hearing. This means it is the ground from which we all start, a perfect baseline before we ruin our fragile hearing with loud music, jackhammers on asphalt, airplanes taking off, and talking to our in-laws.

The most unnerving thing about the room, by far, was the metallic humanoid torso seated facing the corner like a child in reluctant atonement. This ominous presence housed a collection of scientific instruments used to measure the decibel levels, the refraction rate of sound waves, and other qualities of the space, without disturbing its precious silence. Orfield left it unacknowledged in the far-left corner, watching me with its invisible eyes and listening with its pink painted ears. Resting in the middle of its face was a triangular nose, which, I’m guessing, might have been designed for hominoid realism, as if it didn’t already have enough unnerving features. I nicknamed it Frank, after my father.

After a long week of uncertainty, the allure of the faux-Americana bar in the hotel was inescapable. It seemed like most people in that part of the country preferred bars over other forms of entertainment. There were far too many colors at that one, too many

bright greens that drew attention to the room's upsetting kitsch. And there were only three stools, three green stools that looked more fitting in a barbershop.

"Can I just get a Dewar's, rocks please?" I said to the bartender.

I swirled my index finger in the drink, thoroughly coating myself in the antiseptic bliss, as I watched the ice cubes tumble. The mesh floor, the foam walls, the *mort instantané* of sound, the robot, more names than I could possibly remember, Mr. Orfield. I indulged myself with the cheap scotch, waiting like that, staring into my drink, for what felt like minutes before a tap on my shoulder broke my meditation.

"Hello?" I asked without turning.

"I see you've found my favorite part of this hotel."

"Well, given the choice between this bar and public access TV upstairs, I'd say there was no real choice. You come down for a drink?"

"Yeah, why not?" Talbot addressed the bartender, "Two more of whatever this guy's got. And put them both on my tab."

I raised my glass, "Those both for you or what's the occasion?"

"I just want you to feel welcome here. Orfield can be a bit off-putting at first and the rest of them tend to keep to themselves, you know?"

"I'm well-accustomed to outlandish behavior, unfortunately," I said, stretching my arms, "So you have a tab here? You don't strike me as the kind of person who'd have a hotel bar tab."

She laughed with her mouth closed as the bartender brought her drink, "As you said, there's no real choice, right?"

I shrugged with my eyebrows, "You got me there."

“I’m pretty sure they charge it to my room. I just like to say ‘put it on my tab.’ Makes me feel old-fashioned.” We laughed and clinked our glasses before sipping the Red Label. The sound of our cheers rung out like a tuning fork, like the one my father used to keep on his desk, in case he needed to hit a perfect C in the middle of a deposition, I guess.

“I have to come clean, I didn’t come down here just to run up my tab. If you have a moment, I would love to talk about today and some of your impressions from the tour.”

I turned to face her, “How did I know this wasn’t a chance encounter? Honestly doctor, I’m exhausted from everything; the flight and the tour and, you know...everything, so maybe we could just talk tomorrow?”

“Oh of course, I thought you might like to know a little bit more about Dr. Orfield,” she said, looking at me from the side of her eye, “and how things may proceed tomorrow.”

“Maybe you can tell me what planet he’s from? And who would’ve thought to make the entire floor and ceiling out of goddamn chicken wire? That’s pure genius and Frank—I mean, the uh...that thing, the metal humanoid thing, what’s that about? He acted like it wasn’t even there.”

“Hah! I knew you’d get a kick out of that. He just came in one day with that and said, ‘I’d like to introduce y’all to the new intern,’ and started shoving all the instruments and machines into it before we could say anything,” a U2 song was playing on the radio, one I’d already heard about three times since landing.

“Too funny...I can almost hear his voice when you say it that way.” Maybe I was too tired or maybe I was just hooked by the music, but the purpose of our conversation

had become hazy. I took a sharp breath, “Doctor...” she looked over, “How exactly did you know I was here at the bar?”

She blushed, “I asked the receptionist. You’re hard to miss with that tomato outfit.”

She was referring to my bright red puffy jacket that I’d bought at the airport on *her* recommendation. She’d said it fit my personality or something like that.

She smiled back, “You have no idea how hard it was to hold in my laughter in the store,” she practically shouted at me.

I saluted her with my drink, “Not an easy task to pull a fast one on me. Granted, I’m the last person who’d notice something like that, but still.”

“The real reason I came down here was, well, what Orfield showed you today, that wasn’t really everything. It wasn’t even close, actually.”

“What? What do you mean?” I said, caught off guard.

“I’m sure you’ve read that the record amount of time spent in the room was 45 minutes, but none of those articles can really tell the whole story. What I’m trying to say is, well, some strange things happened in those 45 minutes. Shortly after the record was awarded, Mr. Orfield realized that uh...the room offered more than just silence.”

“I’m still not following, offered what?”

“What he said about full sensory deprivation, it sounds like hyperbole, but it’s true. With the lights off, with nothing in there except cold metal and fiberglass, and nothing to latch on to outside of one’s own mind, the room is not just the quietest room in the world, but the single most sensory-deprived experience a human can have. Are you understanding?”

“Not really, I thought I was here to test silence?”

“Yes, in a way. It’s closer to say you’ll be testing your endurance. When Dr. Orfield did the experiment, his testimony and the EKG readouts were distressing, to say the least.”

“Distressing?” Her hand was wrapped tightly around her drink, “In what way?”

“Visual and auditory hallucinations, paranoia, anxiety, heart palpitations, excessive sweating, nausea, the list goes on and these symptoms are the same for every trial we’ve conducted.”

“Is that all? A little nausea? Just give it to me straight, Doctor,” I was getting tired of this runaround, “Should I be afraid of this room?”

“John, I would absolutely be scared. But you’re asking the wrong person. I get scared just thinking about it.”

“What’s so frightening about the room?” I said, maybe a bit too loud.

“It’s hard to describe, really. Just a feeling I get...like if I were to call for help in there, who would hear me? I get afraid, it’s an awfully lonely situation to willingly put yourself in, don’t you think?”

“The most alone you can get, if I’m to believe Dr. Orfield,” I said, looking down into the bottom of my drink, “So you think I shouldn’t do it then?”

“You’re gonna be put in there for a long time, John. Hours and hours. Do you really think you can handle that?”

“You think I can’t?”

“I don’t know you very well, I just know that you seem eager to get in there and I don’t want to see you get hurt. You’re very heady, you know.”

“So I’ve been told,” I chuckled, “and I appreciate your looking out for me, Doctor, but I flew all the way out here to test that room and I’m not leaving until it’s done.”

“So you’re not going to listen to everything I’ve told you?” She looked at me, her lips forming a distressed half-circle that matched her eyebrows.

“Sorry Doctor, but I’m not.”

“I want everybody in here for this one, yes you too, yup Derek, get in here. Is that everybody? Good, good,” Orfield corralled us all into the control room the next morning for what felt like the beginning of a moral-boosting seminar, “I want everybody to look at these two lines here,” he said, pointing to two identical lines on an otherwise blank piece of paper resting on the console. “Can someone with half a brain tell me which one’s longer?”

“They’re equal, sir.” I chimed in, hoping to avoid an effacing demonstration.

“Very good, John. See, everybody! The man’s not all talk!” This drew a gentle chuckle from the crowd, and a glare from me.

“Now, if I put inward facing arrows on the ends of this one, and outward facing arrows on the ends of that one, somebody tell me which one is longer.” One of the technicians took the bait and chose the line with the outward facing arrows. “Yes! Very good! Even knowing beforehand that they’re the exact same size, the brain still visualizes this one,” he pointed to the outward facing one, “as being longer than the other. I haven’t changed anything about the lines themselves; I’ve only changed their context. This, in turn, alters the way your brain interprets them. It decides that the sensory information it’s receiving is faulty and instead of choosing between fallacies, it invents a new answer and one line is now suddenly longer than the other. This is something fundamental to the way we think, like our ability to see trees and know

they're trees." Nobody knew what the Hell any of this had to do with our experiment, what lines and arrows and trees were going to tell us about silence.

I looked around the room for Dr. Talbot, but she wasn't there. Who knew if she was even going to come into the lab today? I hadn't meant to hurt her feelings; she'd just aggravated me with her questioning. And her insolence, approaching me like a friend then treating me like a patient. I approached Dr. Orfield, "Hello sir, that was quite the demonstration."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I'm a bit confused, how exactly do the arrows relate to sound?"

"John, not everything's about sound. You're going to be fighting your mind more than anything else in there. It's an example of the brain's interpretive abilities, how it fills in lapses of information, such as silence. In there, there's a strong chance you could begin hallucinating almost immediately, but they're just hallucinations. Nothing to be afraid of."

"Did you hallucinate in there?"

He smiled and closed his eyes, "I think it was about twenty minutes in I started to see a faint light emanating from the wall. Like there was a brilliant sun gleaming just behind the wall, feebly shining through the concrete. It was the strangest thing, like I could just stick my hand through that wall I'd fall right through the void of space...But it was just lights in my eyes. Mental masturbation, so to speak. We're going to be prepping the room soon, so make sure to get yourself ready."

"I'm ready to go whenever you are."

"Calm down there, just a few moments is all we need. Should only be another half hour or so."

“Do you mind if I observe the prep? I’m fascinated with how you achieve these suppression levels.” I could see his smile begin to quiver.

“Why don’t you save your strength for the room, Johnny. We need you in there more than out here,” he said, lightly grabbing my arm near the shoulder.

“Oh, okay,” I looked off towards the room. I thought it odd, his reluctance to let me in the command center during the preparations. But he was right; I needed to conserve my energy if I was going to be in there all day. I hadn’t been able to sleep the past few nights, so my energy was in short supply.

He let go of my shoulder and joined the other techs quietly prepping the room for entry. I went back to the rec room since they didn’t seem to need me elsewhere. I sauntered down the grey hallway, towards Talbot’s office. I’d still not seen her come in, but the coffee machine was down by her end. The previous night I’d laid awake wondering why I’d quite suddenly turned on my only real friend at the facility. And for what? Because she was trying to look out for me, because she was “moming” me a bit too much? But the image of her sitting there alone at the bar after I’d left had helped kerp me awake. I stopped outside her office, looking carefully at the door and her nameplate. I rested my head on the door for a few seconds when I heard a faint noise from inside the office. It sounded like a pained, wheezing bird was frantically trying to escape. I opened the door quietly.

“Doctor,” I said, sneaking up to the desk, “Juliet!” I said louder.

She looked up for a second, her eyes red and inflamed, then she pretended to search her desk, “So you’re really going through with it?”

“I’m sorry, but yes.”

“John, it’s fine, I get it.”

“No, I didn’t need to act so defensively. It’s just my first reaction when someone tries to look out for me. I think a psychologist of all people would understand that.”

“Yes,” I’d clearly affected her, normally she was warm and bubbly, but now I could barely get two words out of her.

I stuck out my hand to shake, “So we’re alright?”

She took it, “Decidedly. Anything else?”

“Orfield told me my talents were better suited inside the room than outside it.”

She shook her head as she pulled out some more tissues from her bottom drawer. She continued to rummage through her desk, stopping every couple seconds to look at a paper and throw it away.

“Juliet, what’s wrong? You’re not talking to me at all.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It’s not you, it’s,” she sighed, “Orfield told me last night...”

“What?”

“I’m fired, effective as of last night. I’m not even supposed to be here today. I don’t know what I’m going to do, where I’m going to find a job,” she sighed.

“He can’t do that, not on the day of the experiment. I can’t believe this. This isn’t right,” I said, making my way towards the door.

“Stop it,” she scolded from her desk, “Don’t let him know I’m here! There’s nothing you can do, it’s my fault that I was fired.”

“How’s that?”

“I called Dr. Orfield last night and told him that I couldn’t in good conscience let you enter that room.”

“Why? Why are you so Hell-bent on keeping me out of there?” I said, holding my arms out to my sides.

“What do you think I was hired to do here? You said it yourself, what use is a psychologist in an acoustics lab. I was hired to monitor you, to monitor all the test subjects, and make sure they’re ready for the experiment.”

“So, did I make you that angry at the bar last night?”

“It has nothing to do with that John. You’re too young; you think you understand everything.”

“You’re not stopping me.”

“Of course I’m not, you and doctor Orfield have made that perfectly clear.”

“I have to do this, okay?”

“I don’t know where you get this finality from,” she stood up from her chair, “it’s just a shitty little lab with a shitty little plaque. This is hardly career-defining work we’re doing here, hardly changing the world. Nothing’s going to change if you decide to pull out.” She stopped talking and the room felt almost deathly quiet.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me doctor, I really do. And I even see where you’re coming from. I think you can understand, I don’t like regret following me around.”

“I can understand,” she said, putting her hand on my shoulder, “But understand this; I won’t be there to protect you from him. He’s going to push you and push you, and you may not come out of it feeling as good as you do now.”

“Well, I’m going to have to take that risk, doctor,” I put my hand on top of hers, “I hope we can meet under better circumstances next time.”

“I really do hope everything goes alright for you,” she said as she lifted a box with all her knick-knacks. I held the door for her as she trotted past me and lead me out of her office, down that long grey hallway.

“We’re ready! Everybody, the moment has arrived,” Orfield announced to the rec room. It was One O’clock; they were going to pull me out around Three for observation. Orfield thought I wouldn’t last longer than an hour. I wouldn’t have bothered showing up if I thought I couldn’t do more than two.

“The palpitations are gonna hit you immediately,” he sighed, flipping a few dials on the console before pushing me gently through the screeching doorway, “there’s just no way around it.”

“Should I take something for that? Maybe a Beta Blocker.”

“No, no, wouldn’t want to taint the results. That’s what this trial is for, to test how long you can do on your own. We’ll see to it that you’re alright from out here.”

We walked through the still life of foam and metal, wire and wood. Frank watched us, his hollow sockets intensified in the dim light. The only change was a new high-back swivel chair in the middle of the room. My resting place for the next few hours.

“Doctor Orfield,” I said feeling the muffled weight of the foam push back against my words, “If I call out you’ll be able to hear me on the other side, right?”

He smiled, “Of course, Johnny. We’ve got all our eyes on you...”

I could barely hear him so I waited for him to continue, but that was all he said to calm my nerves, “Why did you have to fire Juliet?”

His eyes squinted, “Sorry John, I’m having some trouble hearing you,” he leaned down to speak inches from my face, the only way I could fully understand what he was saying, “I let her go. I’m sorry about your personal relationship but it was a personnel decision, not something you should be worried about. Keep your mind loose, now,

you're gonna need it in here." He turned back to the command center and swirled his finger around in the air, signaling that we were ready to go. With a screech and a clamor, the door set closed and thudded to a halt, sealing me within and cutting off the cool air that had been drifting in from the console room.

Minute Zero:

The lights are off. Immediately my eyes struggle to adjust. It's almost too dark, in a way. It's so dark I can't see what else is in the room with me. But I know what's here, I know it's just me, the chair, and Frank over there in the corner. If I keep thinking to myself, for that's all I really have in here, then I should come out of this alright. Just a matter of waiting out the clock. Feels like the fellowship all over again. Isn't that right Frank? He can't speak, he hasn't earned that right yet.

Minute One:

Gotta stop shaking my knee, I keep bouncing it in place, making the whole floor shake. Can almost hear the chicken wire crinkle under my feet. What if Orfield just stole all that wire from his neighbor's coop? Wouldn't put it past him. God, this is uncomfortable. This chair and the floor. Wish I could just take off my shoes and relax for a bit, really take advantage of this space. I can yell as loud as I want to, I just don't really feel like yelling right now. Honestly, the worst thing so far is just the boredom. What in Hell am I supposed to do in here? I can't sing, I can't whistle, I can't even hum a tune. This is so fucked.

Minute Two:

Any minute now Dr. Orfield is going to burst through the door, I just know it. He's going to come in singing praises and spouting jokes. And what did he mean by our "personal relationship?" Did he think Talbot and I were...oh, no wonder he let her go. I'll have to send her a gift basket or something when I get out. Until then, I'm just waiting in place, like time's stopped. There's no way to tell how long it's been, but it can't be more than a couple minutes. It's so strange, it feels like something is going to happen. Like if I just wait patiently enough without disturbing the silence, someone's going to come for me. I just have to keep waiting.

Minute Three:

I'm up now, that much I'm sure of. Not quite sure where I am, but the ground is under my feet and the air is still very much around me. I can't hear a thing, not even a creak in the walls or a fly buzzing around or anything. It took me a little while to stand up just because the sounds of my joints stretching, I could hear it! I could hear the sound, it was like nothing I'd ever heard before. Imagine a stretchy rubber band, a giant one, and it's being pulled and warped and the tension is about to give. To think that happens every time I stand up. There it is, again and again.

Minute Five:

At least my eyes are starting to adjust to the darkness. That's Frank over there in the corner, I think. Either Frank or someone's been standing there for the past few minutes. Could you imagine if that is someone, okay now I have to check. No, good, it's just Frank. Whew, almost psyched myself out. He's not going anywhere. I guess neither am I for the next few hours.

Minute Eight:

This must be what an immigrant in the back of a truck feels like. Not sure where they're going to end up or if they're even going to make it out alive. That feels really poignant, I should write that one down. Maybe if I try really hard I can remember that. Oh who am I kidding, I'm not going to remember. My memory is so static, so fixated on those certain events. I can remember exactly what kind of day it was when I had my first day of school, but ask me what the weather was last week and it's like I wasn't even there. Almost like these gaps reveal a lot more than the actual memories. Huh? Is something there? Oh, there's a strange shadowy thing right in the—no it's nothing. I thought it was a snake or something. False alarm. It moved across the floor, though, I could swear it. Maybe I should close my eyes for a few minutes.

Minute Thirteen:

That stupid U2 song that was playing at the bar yesterday is still stuck in my head. Can't believe it, I was just singing it like ten minutes ago and now it's back again. Every time I turn around I hear new sounds coming from my body, things I've never heard. I can hear moaning from my stomach, every beat of my heart, even the breath creeping in from my lungs and back out through my bronchioles. With each minute I hear more and more. Where have these noises been my whole life? Just going unnoticed, left unheard? I hear the inside of my ears, my muscles stretching, and contracting to bring my invisible hand to my face. There's no way to hear these sounds outside of this room because to listen closely to that mess we call the human body necessitates undivided

attention. To think, if I hadn't called Dr. Orfield that day, I never would have heard these sounds.

Minute Twenty-One:

I think it was Apollinaire who said "People quickly grow accustomed to being the slaves of mystery." I'm not accustomed, I'm trapped. He died before me, but if I can bring his words into this room maybe they will ring louder than my own.

Minute Thirty-Four:

I pace back and forth between sections of the room. If I can't stand then I'm nothing. It must be at least an hour by now, maybe more. The problem with pacing is that each lap gets smaller and smaller. Each time I circle back to where I started, I find I've travelled less distance. Are the walls absorbing the space now? The sound of my body is making my head sore, the defeating clamor of sound. If I try not to listen to it, I hear it more, but when I try to listen to it, I feel lonely. If I could find the door maybe I could let someone out there know, let them know that I'm still here. They need me in here more than out there, after all.

Minute Fifty-Five:

I'm sure nobody's coming for me, I'm sure of it. They said it was only going to be a few hours, so how come they aren't here yet? My hands are getting cold. I can try to rub them together but what's the point? How are they supposed to know when to let me out if they can't hear me? It seems like every time I ask a question the answer gets further away. Time is so fickle.

Minute Eighty-Nine:

If only Talbot were in here too. She was so nice, Jewish on her mother's side if I remember correctly. Why'd I have to get angry with her? She wanted to keep me out of this room. She never told me why.

Minute One Hundred Forty-Four:

These people make assumptions of my ignorance. I'm not cartoonish. I outperformed every expectation and yet nobody wanted me. They ignored me because I showed real ambition. It's been a while now, hasn't it? Feels like forever ago I was arguing with Dr. Talbot. I don't need your help now. The time for that has long passed. Thanks for everything.

Minute Two Hundred Thirty-Three:

The room itself is actively persecuting me, beating me down into the floor. I'm standing in it, waiting to be spit out God knows where. It can't be called sound at all. I can't see my hands, they're gone. They didn't take me with them.

Minute Three Hundred Seventy-Seven:

We hide away from our fears and shy from any challenge that might bring us closer to our real self. Somebody left a shoe in here. I found it in the corner over by Frank, that bastard. He must be hoarding them, or maybe he found a way out. Who did he steal it from? This is quite concerning, great cause for concern.

Minute Six Hundred Ten:

They're not coming for me they're not coming for me. I've screamed. I've yelled. I've screamed a thousand times, they can't hear me. I'm not getting out of here if they can't hear me. Where are they? I'm screaming as loud as I can and I can't even make a sound. She was right, there's nothing here. The devil's left me here because *this* is Hell. I interrupted him again, oh no. I can see Frank moving again. He keeps telling me to look for the light, but what light? All I can see is light.

Minute Nine Hundred Eighty-Seven:

Can anyone really blame me? My father was a terrible man. I remember that time he just took off without telling anyone and three days later he was back like nothing had happened. Mom would just watch through the window for hours at a time. And me, I was just hiding in the basement. Hiding down there like a rat waiting for my chance to strike. I watched her cry over him.

Minute One Thousand Five Hundred Ninety-Seven:

He locked me in a closet when I was seven. Did you know that? He did. I flunked out of math and English and he wouldn't have it. He grabbed my arm hard, I thought I was getting the belt but it was worse. He pushed me in there and I was screaming and begging for him to let me out. He told me I wasn't worth anything if I couldn't do math. Told me he was going to leave me in there until I promised to study. I screamed and nobody heard me and I'm stuck here. Did you know the man you loved could do something like that?

Minute Two Thousand Eighty-Four:

you'll be able to hear me on the other side, right?

all our eyes are on me

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Minute ???:

I want to sleep and dream of that child

I want to die and know his face

That world so gently laid down before us

I died to save the one I can't forget

The child no longer brought here

The Lost Woman

Bethany had never been to Iceland before; the farthest she'd been from the City was Weehawken. Her friends Erica and Abigail had for years mocked her lack of travel. Apparently, she was depriving herself of a diverse picture of humanity, limiting her understanding of the world and her self. Bethany questioned how leaving everything she was familiar with was going to help her "find herself." But ten days of bus rides from one life-changing vista to the next; she had a special feeling about this trip, a feeling she hadn't felt in years. For better or worse she could not decide yet whether to be excited or afraid, but she liked the in-between. It was just the first days of May—the spring's rainy gloom suddenly beginning to wane.

"Screwdriver please, whatever's cheapest sir." She winced at her formality. "Sir," the guy was barely out of his teens. She had planned to meet her best friends at Harry's pub on the Lower East Side to send her off. It was ten minutes to Ten. For her, this was right on time. Harry's was overrun with late-night oglers; football fans all watching burly men steamroll into each other (must have been the New York team winning). Her friends were always late by her standards, but even she admitted her standards were often unreasonable.

She decided she didn't want to be somewhere familiar any longer. For too long she'd felt caught in a loop, moving from one cycle to the next. It was funny, whenever she told people she was headed overseas they would immediately list everything they knew about Iceland, as though she had already been there and back and would confirm it was all real. That volcanoes really shot right out of the ground and there was not a tree

in sight. That the people there really were so friendly and really all spoke English. Luckily for her, everybody (and that included Iceland) accommodated for Americans and their innate desire to view the world in familiar comfort.

“Look at this, put down the phone!” Bethany turned; ready to be offended, until she realized it was her friend Abigail who had so crassly announced her arrival to the entire bar, “Unless you’re buying me a ticket.”

“Sorry Ab, this is a *mecation*. Nobody else allowed.”

“A drink then?” said Erica, who had also arrived with Abigail. They all nodded.

“Do you know anybody there?” Her friends were often intrusive about who she was seeing, like they were jealous of her.

“Not a soul. It’ll be fine, though, I’ll meet people. You know I’ll be thinking only of you. I just wanna get a taste of the good life.”

Bethany looked towards Erica whose sad-drunk eyes were beginning to lose focus. Bethany had trouble relating to them at times, but her friendships were never seriously in doubt; she just liked to pretend that there was drama between them.

“So are you excited?” Abigail said, turning back to her after a few minutes had passed.

“Yeah, I’m really hoping to find myself over there.”

“You’re so gonna be a different person by the end of it. This is your first time, right?”

“Yup. I’ve never really left the City, but like how different could it be?”

Erica laughed and leaned in, “Girl, you have no idea.”

Bethany tapped her foot as she started feeling self-conscious, “I think I gotta head off now and pack up for tomorrow. Thank you for taking me out, I’m gonna miss this—miss y’all so much...” she shot down the rest of her Screwdriver, her favorite since high school. Simple, but effective, just like herself.

“Baaabe!” Erica yelled too loud, “Don’t leave us like this!” Bethany made a mental note to remind Abigail to call her a cab. She didn’t want to leave Abigail with her like this, but she had to start packing for tomorrow.

“Love ya!” Abigail yelled as she left. Bethany blew them a kiss as she backed out the door, stumbling slightly on the lip of the entrance. She checked around to make sure nobody had noticed and smoothed her orange blouse and her faux black leather jacket before heading off towards 12th Street. The city droned by as she pulled out her phone and texted Abigail; make sure u put her in a cab I’m worried about her, and popped her phone back in her bag. As she crossed Avenue A, the streets grew narrower and she had to skirt around obstructive nighthawks clogging her path past a chic wine bar. It was the fourth new business in this same location since last year, not even enough time to unpack all the boxes. She couldn’t help imagining the boxes—brief summations of their contents scrawled in sharpie front and back—the people forced to move on so soon. Like they were shot by the starting pistol. There was so much she worried about; she worried even when she told herself not to.

“Are you sure that’s okay? You don’t want to find someone else?”

Those were the first words her mother had said when she found out Bethany was moving in with a stranger, and a man at that. Bethany had been scared of Jeffrey at first,

living so close to a man for the first time. He was a film student at NYU who usually just watched movies and smoked spliffs with his friends.

“I don’t like the sound of this boy. Where did you say his parents were from again?”

She had assumed they would at least become friends. She tried to be kind; she offered to take him out to dinner the night she moved in. But Jeff was uninterested in sharing anything in his life, conversing with her only when they were completely out of toilet paper. For Bethany, Men—with a capital M—had always been strange creatures.

She gazed out her window at the back of a brick building as her eyes slowly flickered to sleep. Her alarm was for Six, flight at Ten, touch down at Nine PM local time in Reykjavík. She still felt the night stick in her eyes, disobediently forcing them closed the following morning. She was not a morning person, but Bethany knew she wasn’t really a night owl either; she was more of a noon person. She blamed the morning like she blamed her mother; both brutally catapulting her into the world against her will. She took her seat on the plane exactly four minutes past the scheduled departure expecting the pilot to make it up in the air.

“Nervous?”

“Yes.”

“First time?”

“No, I’ve been nervous lots of times,” Bethany had to physically hold her mouth shut to keep from laughing out loud. Both her seatmates were sound asleep, but she didn’t care. She found that sleeping strangers tended to stay asleep. She just wanted to laugh, even if she had already seen *Airplane*.

Normally she could fall asleep almost anywhere; dentist chair, school desk (the kind with the armrest specifically designed to inhibit comfort), but the discomfort of the economy airplane seat coupled with the artificial air, regenerated through mouths and filters countless times during the flight; Bethany soon discovered that this was the one place she could not sleep. This discomfort was new for her, but she assumed it happened to everybody. As the captain announced their arrival time, the pressure in the plane dropped and everything began to feel very heavy, like walking along the deep end of a pool.

“There’s always a line isn’t there.”

“Without fail,” chuckled the elderly woman in front of Bethany.

“Probably gonna be a while.”

“Right. At this rate we may as well just wait until we land,” the woman spoke with a soft foreign accent, something dark and European. She must have been heading home.

“I bet in first class the flight attendants wait in line for you.”

“May-be,” this woman stressed her *may* a bit, “that would also explain why they haven’t answered the damn button. I’ve been trying to order a Gin and tonic for a half-hour.”

“That’s horrible! We deserve better.” Bethany liked this old woman; she shared her general resentment for people in first class.

“Greta. Nice to meet you.” She stuck out her hand to shake. She was in her late-60’s, early-70’s, her wrinkles soft, joyous and unaltered. She had the most delicate, bony hands and a slightly lopsided grin.

“Bethany, it’s a pleasure.”

“So, Bethany, how long are you in Reykjavik?”

“Oh, just for tonight, my bus pulls out in the morning. I’ll be back in a few days though, and yourself?”

“Yes, my good for nothing husband, Harold, and I are staying for the week and then we’re off to France. Marseilles. I *don’t* want to see Paris again. That’s him right over there,” She pointed towards a snoring skinny man with tufted grey hair in his late seventies wearing a baby blue sweater that was at least one size too small, “poor thing, I shouldn’t have let him dress himself. We’re on holiday!”

Immediately Bethany wanted this woman to adopt her. She was the witty, carefree, socialite mother Bethany could only dream of. If she’d brought her own mother, there would have already been an argument about something inane like the meal choice. “They’re awful everywhere, mom,” Bethany would have pleaded, but her mother would have replied, “No, I can’t eat this. Which one did you get—”

“Something the matter? It’s your turn.”

“Oh! Sorry, no—thank you!” She fumbled past Greta and sat in the lavatory, regretting her awkwardness. She could already see Greta returning to her seat, immediately forgetting everything about her. She found an intense ugliness within herself in situations like these. Some darker reality that excluded people like her.

She exited the restroom and, confirming her suspicions, Greta was no longer there. Great, why does this always happen to me? She inched back into her seat and looked at her watch, scratching the side of her wrist. Just a bit before noon, they should be coming around with lunch any minute. She could finish her movie, eat her lunch, and read *The Bell Jar* until touchdown. Just as she was about to put her ear buds back in, she felt a tapping on her shoulder.

“Ah! Oh, it’s you.”

“You sound surprised? Sorry I left you; I saw that uppity stewardess finally had a free moment. The blonde one, over there,” she pointed with her trembling index finger, “and I had to get my Gin and tonic. But then I turned and you let me.”

“Sorry, I—“

“Don’t apologize to me, I left first. Sometimes I forget to pay attention when I really want something, you’ll have to pardon me.”

“Oh, yeah...” Bethany nodded. She studied Greta’s face—too harsh a name for such an elegant face—the wrinkles that formed seemingly out of nowhere and vanished into the corners of her eyes. Her mouth, creased and delicate, folding over itself like a wave dissipating along the shoreline. Hers was a face of wisdom; a face crafted by privilege, molded by time, and etched by experience. Bethany realized she was getting carried away with herself, her mind’s eye fascinating on these negligent details.

“What’s wrong? You are quiet now. Why don’t you and Harold switch seats? He won’t mind, he’ll just fall back asleep, the bastard. Happens every time we fly and I have to just sit there and watch him.” And just like that, a smile formed across Bethany’s face.

Bethany realized that her seatmates were basically experiencing time travel while she and Greta and the rest of the insomniacs endured the full temporal weight of the journey. People like Harold just dropped into their seats, shut their eyes and awoke twenty-six hundred miles later, well rested and unaware of the torments burdened on the rest of the plane.

It was almost Nine PM, Iceland time, soon to touch down on the outskirts of Reykjavík. Bethany and Greta were currently transfixed by the luminous skyline, and

they'd been talking for close to two hours. Bethany had learned about Greta's kids—lawyers—New York City elite that made her feel unaccomplished. But Greta was also one of those elite, a gallery curator who travelled often to France and Spain, who subsisted on a diet of wine and cheese, who had Jeff Koons and Tania Bruguera in her contacts and even went on a date with Frank Stella way back. Bethany recalled her old paintings gathering dust under her bed, wondering if it was too early to bring them up, ultimately deciding those pieces were too raw. She'd have to find some of her works before she got all dark and moody.

And Greta had gotten a bit intrusive, but she'd also had three Gin and Tonics so Bethany forgave her.

"I could never deal with artists. You must have the patience of a saint."

"Yes, well consider me the patron saint of bad luck 'cause it seems to follow me everywhere."

"Oh, how so?"

"I shouldn't complain, I live a lot better than most. But my last three shows have been cancelled, all because this Peruvian bastard's decided to have his mid-life crisis at 26," she raised her glass in an imaginary toast, "This one's for Fernando, may he choke on it wherever he is." Greta had been a very intense presence, but not an off-putting one. "You get out of the city very often?"

"Actually this is my first real trip if you can believe that."

"I don't believe it, your first time out of the city? But you're so young and beautiful, you need to see the world. It's the best thing you can do with your time, before you're old like me."

“Well, that’s what I’m doing now, aren’t I?” Greta looked at her like she was crazy, “I guess I just always liked the City, what’s not to like? I wanted to go on trips and see the country, but every time something fell through, was never in my control really,” she wiped some condensation from her plastic cup.

“It’s a disgusting city really.”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s that bad. Why do you still live there if—” Bethany started.

“You haven’t been anywhere, let me tell you. You’ll see Iceland and then you’ll know, you’ll know that nowhere else are people so mean as New York. Nowhere.”

“But there’s mean people everywhere.”

“Not like New York,” she shook her head, “You think I ever had it easy? New York is a man’s world. It takes twice as much work in a man’s world.” Bethany was unsure how many drinks she’d had, but she was sure it was too many.

“How’s that?”

“There’s three types of pain that are the worst,” Bethany could barely keep up with Greta’s ramblings, “and I’ve had them all; family, love, and death. They’re the worst because you’re helpless to stop them.” Greta was looking off toward the front of the plane.

“What about physical pain?”

“You take a pill. You cannot take a pill for love, you cannot take a pill and make death go away. Or maybe you can, I haven’t had such a pill in my life.” Greta’s dark blue satin dress wrinkled with her back and forth rocking, “So tell me, which pain is yours?”

Bethany thought to herself for a moment, “I guess you could say all of the above, but mostly death.”

“Oof,” she winced, “that’s the worst one.”

“I don’t know, family can be pretty shit too...”

“Yeah, and men,” Bethany laughed as she wiped her eyes, looking around at the other passengers for comfort. There were a lot of tourists, mostly rich Americans hitting the hotspots of life.

“My first husband died in his sleep. God how that man snored—first time I woke up feeling rested in years,” Bethany snorted shamefully, “he was a nasty man, after our honeymoon things fell apart but it took us six years to realize and then the bastard’s heart decided to give out, right in the middle of the divorce—can you believe that?” She stamped her foot.

“Oh I can’t even imagine. Any kids with that one?”

“No, thankfully. Didn’t have the kids ‘till I met Harold. I make fun of him, but really, deep down, he’s the best man I ever met. He does well for himself and he raised the kids singlehandedly while I was travelling. I guess that was kind of vain, but they all turned out all right. You never know how things are going to go, you just have to look out for yourself,” she patted Bethany’s knee, “You want kids?”

Bethany just shook her head and pursed her lips, accidentally accentuating her mousiness.

“I was the same at your age, only interested in the art world, kids would hold me back, all that. What do you do?”

“Nothing that special...” Bethany trailed off.

“It’s a lot more work than it sounds; curating. Not a job for everyone, you know. You have to go to school for a long time and *then* your chances are still only 1 in 1000. I entered the art world to avoid politics and bureaucracy, but the more money there is, the more artists become like businessmen,” her tone was becoming vitriolic and Bethany

couldn't help but wonder if Greta was an angry drunk, "Difference is artists can't live with bureaucracy, bureaucracy and confronting the idea that their art takes money away from people who could actually use it. But anyway," Greta waved the whole thing off and smiled, "not to talk your ear off, it's just, it's taken me a while to get to a good place in life so when I see you hurting like this all I can think about is how much time you have to turn things around."

Bethany answered Greta with nods and smiles. She hadn't told Greta about any of her pain, but Greta had been able to see right through her, almost immediately. "Now it's your turn, Bethany, I shared my secrets. If I remember you said it was death ailing you?"

"What?" Bethany shook her head.

"I asked what your pain was, and you said 'all of the above, but death mostly,' if I remember correctly?"

"Oh, well yeah, death. Death and I go way back, back before I even knew what death was," Greta nodded, "anyway, Anatola—Ann or Ana I called her..." she had to stop for a moment and collect herself. "Sorry, I have a hard time saying her name, even thinking about her."

"Go on, at your own pace."

"She, she and I were together, oh...almost three years. She was everything for me, the first everything. It was like life was something new, that first time, during those High School years, when you think everything's against you. I could tell the moment she'd entered a room, some kind of glow about her."

"Two young people in love. You were together?"

“I’m idealizing a bit, she hurt me. We were on and off, but it was High School, you know? First love, that sort of thing. I hurt her too, we were so new at everything, it takes time to really know how to care for someone. But she wanted to go on a trip. Now my mom’s liberal, but she’s still my mom, so she said absolutely not. I was too young, or it was too expensive. Like her fucking nose job wasn’t expensive. It was all lies; she just couldn’t live with me seeing a woman while she had nobody to love for herself.”

“You never talked about it?”

“We did. She wouldn’t budge on any of it. So I told Ana, I told her she would have to go alone, and she was heartbroken. She was afraid of leaving the country by herself, it was her first time. She’d been counting on me going with her. But I thought she could handle herself, she was always so strong. I’d watch her run in gym class, she’d just fly past the boys even, in those loose white gym shorts. She had enough strength for the both of us; I was always the problem. I told her she had to see it through; she couldn’t let my mom win. It was only Canada for God’s sake, I told her they basically didn’t even have crime in Canada,” Greta put her arm on Bethany’s shoulder, “Why did I let her believe me? I couldn’t even believe it myself.”

“What happened?”

Bethany inhaled sharply.

“I sent her off at Penn Station, kissed her on the track, the whole deal. She didn’t have a phone so we had no way of talking, but it was only a week—less than, if I remember.” She put her hand on Greta’s, grasping her fingers with assurance. “Got the call three days later from the principal, he’d talked with the police. They’d spoken French so he couldn’t understand at first but,” she wiped a tear off her cheek, “she was gone. Just disappeared. She never made it back to her hotel that night—last she was

seen was at a bar talking to some people around our age, I think she was trying to find some clubs or something, and then she was gone.” Bethany stared dead-eyed out the window.

“I guess she’s still technically missing, but even if they did find her, she’s died so many times in my head. That first week, every day I wished she’d just died. I felt horrible about it, thinking that way, but when I thought about what else could be happening to her, about all the shit she was probably going through, her father and all the shit he did to her, her brother who was barely hanging on—he’d attempted suicide the year before—and how her father blamed her for it, made her feel responsible. It made me sick to think that she’d tried to get away from it all, that she would’ve wanted to get away from me, too. Oh God—I thought it would be easier to talk about, so much time has passed. When I look out the window I can still see her down there somewhere, just waiting for me to find her. But she’s dead, she has to be.”

“You will overcome this Bethany, I promise you. You’ve already lived through the worst part.” Greta was in tears; she stroked Bethany’s hand, like a mother praying with her child. Bethany looked up for the first time at Greta staring intently at her, but all she could see were Greta’s hands, those wrinkled, veiny hands that looked so fragile, but had done so much. The years had woven a topographic image right there on her hands, her hands that lifted into the air, like a ghost, and came down on Bethany’s face, gently rubbing a tear from her cheek.

“I’m okay...it feels good to say it out loud, get it out of my head.” Bethany said with her eyes closed, savoring the intimate human contact. It had been a long time since someone had touched her this way.

“Now I understand, Bethany, I see your pain. Thank you for telling me.”

As the island of Iceland came into view, they made plans to meet again in four days, when Bethany would circle around the northern part of the island and arrive back in Reykjavik; a city where mountains punctuate the skyline like towering icebergs equidistant from the moon at any vantage.

The brutal winter had almost fully thawed through and though it was still a bit cold, hibernating foliage had finally emerged from underneath the layers of frost. Bethany checked in to her first hotel, a three-star Hilton, and asked the concierge when the tour bus would be leaving the next day.

“All bus tours leave at precisely Eight AM sharp. Continental breakfast is available starting at Six-thirty AM sharp, madam,” She sounded as though she’d learned English from a Brit who learned it from an Iclander. Her voice was both formal and foreign and made Bethany uncomfortable.

“Eight AM, really?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. If you would prefer, madam, I could put you on a tour for the next day? It will only cost—“

“No, no, that’s alright. I’ve already spent enough money,” she looked around hoping some miracle would delay the bus and sighed, “I guess I’ll keep it.” Trudging up to her room, she tried to imagine what kind of hotel Greta would be checking into. A five-star Marriot maybe? Or a cozy BNB? She wished she’d asked for Greta’s phone number or some other way to reach her, if only to talk more. And it only took one bite of the continental breakfast for Bethany to realize it would not start her day the way she’d hoped. Mixed in with the hard bagels and the fruit coated in a weird white filmy substance were some local specialties. There was *Hafragrautur*, also known as oatmeal.

She heard the word “grout” in the name, which she found appropriate and there was *Skyr*, a sort of cream cheese-like yogurt. She actually enjoyed the *Skyr*, which came out of her mouth as, “Skyore?” when a woman behind her asked what it was. It had a slightly sour, sweet taste, and it reminded her of home in an odd way and she felt sad. The coffee was so thick she thought it was chocolate sauce at first.

There was a skinny man with a dark-blue beret waiting for the bus and several people in clothes far too warm for the weather. To make up for the terrible start, she’d put on her favorite vintage floral-print sweater that was so comfortable she didn’t need to wear anything underneath. She wore a blouse, just in case, matching it with her comfortable beige jeans. On time, the bus pulled up to the front of the hotel and a uniformed man exited the bus and helped her schlep her bulky suitcase into the cargo hold.

“Ready for the tour to start?” he said with a deep rounded *ou* sound, typical of the Icelandic accent. He was a rather burly man with short blonde hair.

“Yes, hi! Are you the guide or the driver?”

“Just the driver. The guide is on his way.” She thought it weird they wouldn’t come together.

“Will he be much longer?”

“Oh he’s usually on time, nothing to worry about.”

“It’s just, we all got up so early, I don’t see why we should have to wait—”

“Okay, stretch your legs now, we’re gonna be on the road for a while before the first stop. Lots of beautiful things ahead!” He announced to the world and boarded the bus.

“All right...” she said to herself, at least one of them was excited. She boarded the bus passing 30 to 40 identical tourist faces staring up at her. There were some couples mixed in, a few families here and there, but mostly there were people with backpacks travelling alone. There were some dark clouds in the horizon, storm clouds just beginning to creep into the sky. Soon they would burst over Reykjavík.

There was an empty seat in the back where she inserted herself between a middle-aged white man chatting with his wife and an Asian couple (the only two races represented on the bus, she observed) whose attire seemed more appropriate for a mountain climbing expedition. The other travellers—there were about 50 in total—all seemed to be in a state of unrest, buzzing in entropic bursts. As she watched them, struggling to breathe in the surrounding bedlam, she saw children unable to stay put in their seats and a group of students talking excitedly about the refugee crisis and taking selfies. Bethany recalled what she’d told Erica and Abigail about “meeting new people” and tasting “the good life” and she felt her arms begin to tense up and retract.

Her attention finally rested on a woman who looked a lot like herself. It was an accurate comparison considering her small, pointed nose and condensed facial features made only more petite by her black circular glasses. Her long brown hair was often in a ponytail or flying loose in the wind, curling under her arms and around her body, which was small, like a mouse, and inherited straight from her mother. She observed that this woman had too many bracelets and her mouth was set in a semi-permanent under bite. She was starting to hate this woman and she didn’t know why. She saw her long, elegant face, like a horse’s, and she wanted to pull her big nose and poke her beady eyes. The woman reminded her of the people who’d tease her about her face. In High School, John

K. had said, “No way, her face is like Minnie Mouse, no thank you,” and then Sarah Michelle told Abby G. who told John C. who told Bethany’s friend Abby who told Bethany who cried the whole night and was suspended the next morning when she threw hot water all over John K’s crotch. But now she accepted the comparison—she thought she made a pretty cute mouse.

At last, almost a half-hour late, the tour guide drifted in carrying a wireless microphone and a green duffel bag. He was a short man, his shortness made all the more apparent by his slouch and stooped gait. This man looked the part he played at the imaginary used car lot in Bethany’s mind. He had stubble, a highlighter-yellow vest to match his Eurotrash sportswear, enough layers to start a clothing drive, a sizeable paunch to compliment his gleaming face, and vintage Ray-bans folded neatly over his collar. If he’d looked any different she may have asked for her money back.

“Sorry for the delay, ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard. My name is Jakob and it is my personal responsibility to ensure that every single one of you has a good time and we all stay safe, ya?” He had a slight nod when he talked and his teeth were full of gaps and fillings, but nevertheless, Bethany trusted him entirely. He handed out some cheap chocolates for everyone to enjoy, so he couldn’t be that bad.

“And here we can see the Iceland Parliament, called in our country *Althing*. It was originally founded in the year 930 and is one of the oldest parliament in the world. The building was first outside Reykjavík, but it was restored and relocated to the city in...” Jakob growled into the microphone, holding it far too close to his face, mushing his words together. As Jakob continued to expound the past, present, and future of the single most important building in Iceland, Bethany stared out the opposite window

where a team of randy ducks were swarming an old woman with a headscarf who wanted nothing more than to feed them.

“Oh!” Bethany exclaimed as the seething mass of waterfowl violently nipped at the woman’s bag wherein lied the seed and bread she’d brought. The woman fell over and her bag spilled onto the grass and the ungrateful ducks crawled over her to get to the crumbs. They appeared to be feasting not on the millet she’d brought, but on the old woman herself, who was flailing and scrambling to right herself. Bethany couldn’t help but giggle; there must have been at least 30 ravenous ducks. She captured the ordeal on video, unable to look away or any closer. She knew she shouldn’t be laughing, but there was no way she could help herself.

“Excuse me, do you mind moving so I can get a clearer shot?” asked the wife of the middle-aged man, breaking Bethany out of her spell.

“Not at all.”

“No, I meant the other way...” the woman signaled with her hand.

“Oh! Sorry.” Bethany tried to shift out of the way again, but in the process she spilled the chocolates that Jakob had given her, leaving a greasy mess on her thighs. She cursed her clumsiness and, trying to wipe it away with her hands—she should’ve used a napkin, she realized—spread the moist, sugary mayhem all over her favorite jeans, wiping it uncouthly on her sweater. She had assumed the woman was trying to photograph the ducks, but she had actually been trying to photograph a building. Now Bethany’s pants were ruined and her sweater a mess, all for some stupid photos of a building that wasn’t going anywhere. At least the ducks were cute, if a bit licentious. The rain had really begun to come down hard.

About an hour outside of Reykjavík the bus arrived at a “scenic rest area” and Bethany took the opportunity to pull some extra clothes out from her luggage. It actually was quite a scenic rest area neatly situated between two competing fjords. Several plain white bridges poked out in the horizon connecting the two sides of the gorge that could have been in two separate countries they looked so different. They had been riding along the Western bank on their way to Sauðárkrókur, which was a smaller fishing town in the North with volcanic hot springs.

Bethany felt inspired for the first time in a while, wondering why she had ever stopped drawing and writing like when she was a kid. A year ago she’d found some of her old paintings left dust-soaked under the bed, some old etchings and collages she’d done in art class. Her work was highly suggestive, impressionistic but vague; likely the result of teenage self-awareness reaching into her troubled thoughts and spitting out brushstrokes. She was immediately reminded why she had stopped painting and threw them back underneath the bed, where they belong. The only thing keeping her rooted in the present were modern cars on the road and wind turbines in the distance.

The landscapes they passed, if in another life she had continued to paint, may have offered her a subject. She was most inspired by the hidden worlds each passing frame represented. The thousands of onlookers like herself that had passed through here over the years and felt the same rush of euphoria, the same physical need to paint the land. She’d never felt that way in the ever-photogenic city of New York. Now wearing a turquoise fleece and her backup jeans, Bethany snapped a few shots of the scenic view as a flock of grey geese flew by, eventually making her way back onto the bus.

It was around 4:30 when the whispers began making their way through the aisles like smoke from an inferno unseen. From her seat at the rear of the bus, Bethany witnessed the genesis and subsequent growth of the whisper. Small, idling conversations, like a game of telephone in elementary school, beginning at the front where Jakob asked a few of the elderly couples something discreet. Dripping slowly from there, the whispers snaked their way past sleeping children and the students arguing about pronouns until they reached the back where Bethany was finally privy to the same realization that had now condemned the bus in paralytic stupor. Someone was gone—missing. She was white, not very tall, no more than five-feet-three, maybe four, and she had brown hair and no distinguishing marks. She could have been anybody, one of about 15 different women, including Bethany.

“All right, I’ve spoken with the driver and he says it will take us about an hour to retrace our path to the rest area in Hvalfjörður—where we all agree we last saw this missing woman. Does anyone have any idea where she could have gone? Her name? Anything?”

The air hung stagnant in the wake of Jakob’s questions. Scanning over the passengers, Bethany couldn’t put a face to the disappeared—she was anonymous by description, a Jane Doe or a John Deer, a wallflower. A headcount, in hindsight, should have been Jakob’s responsibility, as he sat patting his head with a tissue.

“Ok...ahh, well I don’t know what else to do,” Jakob continued after the awkward silence, “so we’re just going to have to go look for her ourselves.”

“Shouldn’t you call the police?” A concerned older woman asked.

“We’ll be there in less than an hour. I’m sure she’s waiting for us at the rest area, she probably went for a hike and lost track of time.” Bethany watched a series of

affirmative nods follow his comment. The lost woman could have been waiting right there at the rest area (where else would she have been?), but she could have also been trying to disappear on purpose, or worse. The prospect of a warm bed and relaxing music now seemed distant like the volcanic peaks jutting seemingly straight from the curvature of the earth on the horizon.

Bethany stared through the window as the bus came to a halt at almost the exact time they were supposed to have arrived at Sauðárkrókur. The rest area was deserted as they'd left it; no luggage, no note, no lost woman.

"Oh fuck, FUCK!" Jakob pulled at his hair, cursing the air as he paced and sweated in front of the bus. It didn't matter how many layers he removed, there was always another sweatier one underneath. He muttered into his cell phone, to someone, "Nei. No, ég veit ekki, ég-No, ég-við gert aðeins einn veg! Ég gerði ekki, I-OK!" He slammed his phone shut and scurried back on board with a look in his eyes that made Bethany wish she'd stayed in the States.

"Ok, we checked the bathrooms, we checked the whole thing; she's not here so we need to start the search in teams. Police are coming with flashlights and walkie-talkies. We are going to split up and we are going to find this missing woman. I know we are all thinking the worst thing right now, but she could have decided to go for a walk and got lost or something..." Bethany, meanwhile, thought only about the darkness they were plunging into. About what could possibly await them, venturing through the same gloom this woman disappeared into. In her trembling hands rested this lost woman's fate, and in her fate lay Bethany's as well.

Once the police arrived, they formed a perimeter around the surrounding area, an area made mostly of grey glacial boulders and stagnant ponds of mud and rainwater. Around the rest stop were hills blocking the horizon in most directions, sloped at insurmountable angles. The recently thawed ground was sludge-like in areas, blocking off many promising pathways. Bethany split off with a group of four other people, two police and two passengers—a couple—(the man in his mid-thirties held the woman with both hands like she was trying to get away and the woman wore a space-dye sweater and looked at everyone as though they had something important to say) searching towards the south, south-west in the chance this lost woman had taken off for the coastline. There wasn't much off in that direction, in any direction in fact; the nature of the countryside revealed it had nothing to hide.

The officers were more ragged than she was used to, weary from *years* of enduring these same feelings. She wondered if it ever became easier. One officer was significantly older and more mustached than the other, blonder one. She had an intrinsic distaste for interacting with police, but being in a foreign country and one so liberal as Iceland, they didn't feel like real authority figures, similar to the way she handled foreign currency like play money.

“Hvað finnst þér?” the blonde muttered under his breath.

“Um hvað?”

“Þú heldur að hún verður að snúa upp í kvöld?”

“No...” the officer's pouting, furry lip betrayed his dialect.

Bethany didn't need to understand the language to understand the sentiment that the officer's tone betrayed; they weren't going to find a woman—they were searching for a body.

“We’re here!” she yelled into the cold night air. Midnight was approaching and the search would have to run double time, as hypothermia would quickly become a reality for the lost woman, wherever she was.

“We’re here! Where are you?” the couple yelled in unison.

As Bethany hoisted herself over a copse of wiry bramble, she felt the wind dying around her. The sudden burst of silence whipped her around. The pull of darkness in opposite directions called her name in syllables and haunts. A shape unmistakable emerged from the shadows behind her. She let out a wounded whisper, “A-Anna—”

“It’s no use, there’s nothing over here. No trees, not even rocks anymore,” the blonde officer appeared behind her, shaking his head, “there’s no use—at least, not this way.”

“Yeah, I think we should rejoin the group. It’s getting cold out here.” She looked back at the shadow, a log from an old split-rail fence. This direction was pointless; she wouldn’t even find a deer this way. She gave one final shout before heading back to the rest area.

By the time Bethany returned it was close to Three in the morning and the children were asleep on the bus. She noticed a small campfire and took a seat with six other weary individuals. Some were taking turns sleeping and eating crackers and biscuits while others played cards, smoked, or talked in short sentences, heads bowed in contrition.

“Any news?”

“Nothing,” said a young man with a beret as he cleared some space for her, “not a trace—we looked all over the ridge, about a mile from here, and I heard the police branching out in every direction. Nothing.” Dissonance hovered between them, suffocating their words—nothing—as if they blamed each other for allowing this to happen. Bethany studied this man in the campfire’s light. He looked sweet, an innocent face matched with short, brown hair, peeking through his beret. The French cliché could have looked comical, but he made it work. He couldn’t have been much older than she, mid-20’s, maybe late-20’s. He could’ve been an artisanal baker in Bushwick or a singer-songwriter in Park Slope.

“What’s your name?”

“Ted,” he said, not looking directly at her, but more off to the side towards the fire.

“Like the bear?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “and like the American President.”

“You’re not American?” she surmised.

“No, Canadian,” she saw the difference now, easy to miss, like Coke and diet Coke, “you’re American I’m guessing, like the rest here,” he said with a sweeping gesture. The other Americans were all watching nature’s most wholesome entertainment, the crackling flames of the campfire.

“Should’ve been obvious when I assumed you were,” they shared a laugh, dissolving back into silence.

“Maybe I’ve been going over this in my head too much. Do you think it might be possible she wanted to disappear? What if we’re actually doing her a disservice by searching?” They were almost all asleep now besides Bethany and Ted.

“Who knows,” Bethany shook her head and yawned, “if she were really trying to escape from...something, she’d be leaving her whole life behind. Those people would want us to search for her, no?”

“Well, yes, of course. But don’t you think she has the right, like if you or I wanted to suddenly disappear from the world? I think we’ve all had that desire at some point.”

“No, I don’t think that’s okay.” Bethany shook her head, “It’s totally irresponsible to run away from your problems, no matter how bad things get.”

“I’m just saying, she must have some reason for wanting to disappear. Not saying she’s innocent, but...”

“I don’t buy it. You look deep enough, there’s always someone who cares about you, someone who doesn’t want you to disappear.”

“But what if she didn’t have anybody like that? What if she was alone, or like cast out of her life or something?”

“No!” Bethany startled herself with her volume, “There’s always somebody...”

“Hey! I know you can’t believe a cliché like that!” They laughed again, something she’d tried to do more often, and watched as a young underdressed woman walked towards their fire.

“Hi. Anyone bum me a cigarette?” she asked.

“Sorry, can’t help you,” Bethany smiled.

“Right here,” the beret’d man, Ted, said as they sauntered away from the group to smoke and think together. They could have known each other they were talking so close, but Bethany couldn’t tell—everyone seemed somewhat familiar at this point. But they kept looking at Bethany as though she were noteworthy, as she pretended not to notice their staring. They peered over their shoulders, squinting their eyes at Bethany and

whispering to each other as their smoke formed a small, noxious cloud. It was unnerving to where she was about to walk over and say something but they disbanded and joined a group who had just returned from searching the jade-green northern hills. She saw Ted and the young woman exchange hushed whispers with more people at a distance she couldn't quite hear, all while pointing her way (as if anyone could ignore them). With each new person they approached, the same result. They would look over to Bethany; exchange a few words, some nodding, and then move on to the next person.

“W—what’s going on...” as the group marched towards her she crawled back a few feet.

“We found the missing woman,” Ted said, without a smile or even a hint of joy.

“That’s great! Where was she? Is she alright?” Bethany couldn’t understand why nobody else seemed happy.

“She’s been over here the entire time,” he replied.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean ‘she’s been here?’ I thought you said you found her?”

“It was you...”

“You mean...” she started quasi-hyperventilating. One man turned around and yelled, “Fuck!” as the rest just looked down at the ground as though something would burst out and swallow them and save them from the realization. Ted smiled in recognition of the absurdity they’d just revealed. Ted acted surprisingly calm for a man coming to such an infuriating realization, but maybe he was still internalizing it, maybe he was one of those people who didn’t show their anger.

“But how is that possible?”

Bethany opted to take a different bus back to Reykjavík and skip the rest of the tour, letting Ted and Jakob and the rest of the group disappear from her life. They couldn't look at her as she said goodbye and she didn't want them to. There was nothing left for her in Iceland. The bus ride back she remembered she'd set a date to meet Greta the next day. If anyone could empathize with her in such a vulnerable situation it would be Greta. She smiled as she looked through the rain-dropped window; maybe there was still some good left in Iceland.

They had agreed to meet at a "young people's bar," as Greta called it, that was near Bethany's hotel. After nearly breaking into tears on the bus listening to "Nowhere Man" Bethany knew she needed something much stiffer than coffee or even a Screwdriver. She figured Greta would only offer encouragement in this regard; as Bethany arrived right on time—ten minutes to Ten—at the *Bar Exotique*. The first thing that struck her was the enormous marine aquarium behind the bar, which she knew she would inevitably end up staring at during their conversation. The place was absolutely packed with all manner of attractive clientele. They filled the dance floor, which looked like an early-morning subway car crammed with smiling, eager faces, many of which were only on their first stop of the long, long night.

The whole bar was filled with these people almost too beautiful to really exist: stunning women in long dresses, coiffured hair in genderless extravagance. Some of the drinks required almost a half-page of florid description. Phrases like, "subliminally intoxicating" and "creatively crafted," belonged in a gallery placard and had no place on a drink menu. It was now almost half-past Ten as her foot tapped against the bar.

Bethany thought she saw Greta for a second, but it was just an older tan woman, her green dress scraping across the floor. A couple more minutes went by and Bethany began to wish she'd asked for Greta's cell phone number. She could go back to the hotel and use the phone there, or even ask the bartender, he seemed like a nice guy.

The lights were beginning to hurt her eyes as she looked at her wristwatch. Greta was an hour late now. She wasn't coming. Bethany ordered one more Screwdriver. She'd teared up in front of this woman. She'd told Greta things that she herself could barely come to terms with. The least Greta could have done was have a drink with her. But maybe she'd just forgotten, maybe it was a miscommunication, she could have said three days by mistake. These were the questions weighing her down when she landed back in New York. Greta had not been on the plane, nor had she made any new friends. Once again it was just Bethany by herself, and she liked it that way. It suited her. She wasn't ready for something new, she needed time. Time was going to heal all, she just needed to wait. She watched a live news report while waiting at baggage claim. Two children had died in a school bus accident in Weehawken. She could do nothing but watch, as her luggage travelled around and around the carousel, waiting patiently for her to reach down and pick it up.

Apple Has a Cougar Problem

The first step, as with any Apple product reveal, is the highly anticipated keynote speech. The CEO approaches the podium, nonchalant like it's any other day, but matching his nonchalance is a cougar, and a big one at that. They trot out like two Oscar hosts, ignoring the screams and flashes of light from the crowd. It must be a hologram, some kind of illusion, but the best tricks are the ones without deception; where the impossible really happens. Nobody listens as the CEO says, "Many in this room right now are laughing—they can't believe what they've just seen. I have with me Sasha, a lovely animal, who, as I'm sure you all know, was part of a group that caused us a bit of a headache back in February." He pauses for laughter, smiling and scanning the room, "I have her with me up here on stage to help announce, what I think, is going to be Apple's most revolutionary product yet..."

In Cupertino, the sun rose to introduce another balmy morning. The CEO rose from his desk, leaving crumpled shareholder reports and blueprints in their disarray. He had no time for these things. It was February, but the sun couldn't have shined any brighter. As he stood, the sun illuminated his stubble and greying hair. The previous night was long, but longer has been his search for Apple's next innovation. He pulled back the blinds, squinting towards the East and the resplendent view that his penthouse office affords. In the distance, a lone figure approached with the rising sun, an unfamiliar presence. The CEO squinted his eyes, further attempting to see what so swiftly approached the Apple headquarters. It was a solitary cougar, a confused passerby

wandering the desert. He watched as it was drawn toward the asylum of the verdant Apple Campus. He smiled, watching it stretch its lean physique and display its formidable teeth. This brush with animal power, this is the strength he needs, a model he aspires to. As he considers the animal's might, three more approach from the horizon. In two weeks the campus will be overrun.

Inside the parking complex, mountain lions leapt out from behind midsize SUVs, reducing them to meager Smart Cars beside their imposing stature. Some of them are almost eight feet long from tip to tail, weighing upwards of 150 pounds. As their numbers climbed, their broad-shouldered gait increasingly mirrored the poise of a confident strut, the same swagger of a senior football star marching onto the playing field. Some sniffed at the circular black trash cans adjacent to the Teslas and BMWs, their claws sliding off the polished metal's sheen, toppling them in their clumsy curiosity sending heavy lids flying with a clatter that echoed through the many floors of empty vehicles. They craned their necks to sift through the rubbish, eventually locating their prey, plunging their canines into gluten-free chicken wraps and turkey burgers.

But living off scraps is unbecoming to a *Puma Concolor Couguar* and they soon began to miss the thrill of the hunt. Mostly active before dusk and after dawn they congregated around the front entrance, crossing their paws one over the other in a practiced show of comfort, settling on the stone steps. Like a new fledgling group of interns they were wary of each other at first; more used to a solitary lifestyle. But from the third-story windows, the programmers pressed their noses against the glass to see the pumas touch their moist noses together, which, in any other context, could have been described as "kinda cute." It was from those same windows that Jeremy, the intern, witnessed a mountain lion chase a deer through the middle of the campus quad

and dig its claws into the deer's spinal column. When Jeremy recounted what he had seen to the other interns at lunch, he found himself suddenly without any appetite for his microgreens. The next day there was no seat for him at the intern's table.

And later that day, as Jeremy was ordered to go out to Starbucks and pick up a few Venti's, the CEO again brooded by his broad window. As Jeremy's caution was more than enough to get him into Starbucks and through the line, it was unfortunately not quite enough to get him back. The CEO pushed his hands against the glass as several cougars followed behind Jeremy unseen. Jeremy's internal organs were quickly made external and his blood was revealed to the world. The two culprits lapped their paws and carried the corpse away from the crime scene. And as they sauntered off they stopped suddenly, almost as though they were aware of their being watched. They turned and craned their necks towards the penthouse, gazing right at the CEO. He pushed off the glass in shock before returning their stares. And as the two parties stared at each other, separated by a few hundred feet, two more cougars snuck up from behind them and snatched what was left of Jeremy the intern's corpse right out of their mouths.

In a state of feline curiosity, these anachronistic refugees began nibbling and pawing at the other bespectacled, beheadphoned techies, spilling their blood onto the porous asphalt and causing screams heard all the way from the vending machines to the CEO's office. While instinctive and good-natured, these playful bites included 1½-inch long canines; sharp enough to slice through muscle and tendon, and up to 350 PSI of undisciplined jaw strength; enough to crush a horse's skull.

One executive, his mind weary and his appetite strong, rushed to leave at the end of his long day. He'd somnambulantly pushed through several meetings, a sexual harassment seminar, a focus group, multiple PowerPoint presentations, and one angry

lecture from the CFO that ended with the phrase, “Also, next time, could you please make these margins 3/8ths of an inch wider?” He exited the front entrance, his gaze focused not unlike a cougar’s tunnel vision in sight of prey. Maybe he was in such a rush because he knew his wife, Heather, had just put the finishing touches on a “special surprise,” which was really not a surprise at all, but the same linguine alla carbonara that she made every time he asked for a “special surprise tonight” and which grew colder and colder, left uneaten on the kitchen table that night. And maybe the cougars had also lapsed into a stupor from loitering around, daydreaming about the possibility of life returning to something they once knew. Maybe they had both lost sight of reality, both slaves to the boredom that so gently erases the animal soul from within. Regardless, the pumas sprung from their reverie, tearing into flesh and khaki in a flurry of claws and screams. They savored the few seconds of chase that almost reminded them what it was like back at the Monte Bello Preserve, barreling down a dusty arroyo at 50 MPH in pursuit of a solicitous doe and her fawns.

This and many similar incidents became infrequent as entry areas were closed off and subverted to the rear of the complex through the use of neon-yellow police tape. After many memos were distributed, it became a common sight to see people hurriedly shuffling through their messenger bags in search of noise-making devices (air horns, pots and pans, the louder the better). Biking to work, formerly a popular form of transportation because of its carbon-emission-reducing, fat-burning abilities, was no longer an option, so motorcycles became a more masculine alternative. Fraternizing in the open-air quad of the Apple campus was just as ill-advised, quickly replaced by shuttered windows and locked doors, cold hearts and stern looks. Despite the precautions, the cougars returned faithfully to crouch under benches and bushes,

waiting for unsuspecting FedEx deliverymen who, lost in the anesthetizing trance of their phones, delivered themselves right to their hungry mouths and claws. The final straw was when the CFO's dog got off its leash.

They were flown in around lunch, practically salivating at the sight of the polychromatic black and white buggies with built-in infra-red tracking systems and intercommunication devices, all part of Apple's exemplary accommodations. No mountain lion stood a chance against the top big cat wranglers in the country, a measure some might call unsportsmanlike—probably someone who's never had to shoot anything with 1½-long canines. The weapon of choice was the Dan-Inject brand CO₂ Injection Rifle; specifically designed for machine-like precision and humane inoculation. The weapons of true 21st century warriors. Each gun carries a history with it; a history of escaped celebrities' pets, a history of zoo animals snatching children of negligent mothers, a history of red-tipped darts shot into cougar's rear-ends (the industry-agreed prime location for ensuring rapid inoculation and minimal structural damage). Each member sheathed their lime-green weapon—a finish reminiscent of their human-killing counterparts—in a dull brown sash, neatly unpacking and assembling them in under a minute, all while maintaining an expression not unlike the sober gaze of an assembly line worker. Encircling their chests, in Pancho Villa-esque bandoliers, were twelve syringe-loaded darts with red fluffy stabilizers, each one loaded with a ketamine-diazepam cocktail strong enough to knock out a full-grown human in one accidental prick.

In a scene resembling some sort of post-apocalyptic wasteland, the wranglers fired haphazardly from their buggies as they tore up the campus quad with headstrong tires. A protective mother and her cubs were cornered by the mess hall, caged and

relegated to a nondescript van minutes later. A dying grandmother, exiled by her family, could put up little resistance as a dart entered the sagging meat of her buttocks. Animal-like yelling echoed through the deserted campus as the celebrations commenced with a round of Budweisers. In the following days, “Apple: Cats Got Their Tongue no More,” was one cat pun of thousands made in newspapers across the country as the nation’s eyes rested on Cupertino.

Apple had transformed a cougar problem into a cougar surplus. But what to do with 2,300 ravenous mountain lions; anywhere from approximately 30 to 50% of California’s total pumas? 2,300 cougars seemed an impossible number, close to Cupertino’s founding population, but the final tally surpassed it, landing precisely at 2,326. In the board-room, the CEO entered to hear this number thrown his way, chanted in droning abundance as the competing voices and opinions personified the entropic minds at work.

“I’m thinking we Disnify the Hell out of them. Do the whole theme park. With 2,300 cougars we can really merchandize the little shits. Cougar plushes, cougar rides, cougar snacks...Cougar Town, we gotta get that trademarked.”

The conference room itself contained a cage, almost like a massive birdcage, which housed a single angry mountain lion. Her name was Sasha, given to her by the CEO, and she was the first puma captured by the wranglers, a living souvenir. The crystalline shutters—hand-crafted by legendary Chinese glassmaker Zhu Yuhuan—reflected prismatically against the eight-foot long stainless (emphasis on stainless) steel bars situated adjacent to the windows, making the only possibility of escape via 12-story drop. Anyone who leaned too far back in their chair could count on a lacerated back and a grin on Sasha’s face.

“John, you don’t know what the Hell you’re talking about, we need to do the right thing here. I was watching the Discovery Channel last night and it got me thinking, what if we use ‘em to fix this drought? You should see the kind of stuff these guys are capable of. We train ‘em to find underground sources of water and we’ll be the saviors of California!”

Each idea was picked apart, pro’d and con’d, written and rewritten. Shouting and fist-flying commenced as mother’s reputations were challenged, personal vendettas revived, and extramarital affairs revealed, all in the struggle for one voice to come out on top. That is, until the CEO sat up from his chair and addressed the room.

“What a magnificent creature, can we all agree on this?” He stared at Sasha, “A relic born from long-forgotten nightmares. These are the kinds of creatures past civilizations could only dream of. The Incas, the Moche people, the Ho-Chunk, and the Cheyenne. They found its cry so fearful, so eerily similar to a woman being murdered...but they believed the call to be death itself and we meager men have captured it! The apex predator! The top of the food chain.” He’d leapt from his chair and frantically paced the room, “This beautiful creature, Sasha, who would not pay top dollar just to lay their eyes on her?”

“...so you *do* want to make a theme park?”

“John, you’re so short-sighted. We are Apple Incorporated! We’re expected to revolutionize everyday life, not fabricate another distraction in a world benumbed by it. I’m talking about putting a relic from times long past right in people’s living rooms. We’ve already got the cougar handlers on the payroll, let’s domesticate them, wrap them up in some fancy packaging, an Apple cage, and sell them; a reminder of man’s long-lost ambitions, a life forgotten to this century’s ineffectual humanity...”

“But can you actually domesticate them? If they’re really so powerful as you say, wouldn’t they be just as violent—”

“John! That’s for the handlers to figure out. Haven’t you any use for me?”

John stumbles out of the room and the rest begin to initiate the affectionately-titled; “Mountain Lion 2.0.” The handlers in charge of taming the untamable rightfully questioned their mission. They balked at the notion that the mountain lion could be proselytized to conform to a domestic human lifestyle. These concerns were silenced by a much larger check.

Each cougar, like Number 1,345, its name branded into the meat above its coccyx, was required to prove it could seamlessly integrate into human existence by relinquishing its animal nature and enduring routines of minutia, the same daily tragedies we must all endure. If they displayed any sign of displeasure after being put on hold by a telemarketer, Thanksgiving dinner with the in-laws, their toast landing butter side down, daytime television, drivers without E-Z passes in the E-Z pass lane, and having a meddlesome little piece of sticky tape stuck on their finger that passes from finger to finger instead of falling off then they would have to endure it all over again. After six months only two cougars, Number 1,487 and Number 2,215, failed the tests and the rest were allowed move on. The two delinquents were released back into the wilderness, tagged and neutered to prevent their violent genes from spreading. As they were released from a shabby crate and shooed back towards the mountains from which they came, they turned their heads and looked deep into the wrangler’s eyes. The horrors they endured still engraved in their memories, they shed two tears; one for the loss of their own, and one for humanity, for God would impart upon the humans no forgiveness.

“Apple, since the dawn of time, has found ways to innovate the way we live our lives,” the CEO looked around at the audience as a screen descended from the ceiling, as if from the heavens. “Communication,” an iPhone appeared on the screen, “Television,” an Apple TV, “Work,” the original Macintosh, “Music,” an iPod, “Almost anything you can think of has been made easier and reflected the ever-changing world because of Apple. But today I’m very excited because I get to show you our latest world-changing product, and it’s been right in front of you this whole time.” Confused mumbles echoed throughout the room as the screen ascended back to the heavens. “Sasha, if would you be so kind, take ten paces forward please?” Sasha looked up at the CEO, blinking once, before executing his command and walking exactly ten paces forward. “Thank you Sasha, that was terrific. Let’s all give Sasha a round of applause.” A few people complied, but their claps were amplified by the room’s dumbfound silence. “Oh Sasha, I don’t think they’re impressed. Why don’t we show them what you’ve learned? Can you...roll over for me?” She executed his command. “Wonderfully intelligent creatures, and I repeat, there is no danger involved.”

“Can you high five?” She executed his command and the crowd chuckled and typed.

“Catch the ball?” She executed his command and the crowd gasped.

“Show me your teeth?” She executed his command, baring her fangs to the audience’s guilty screams.

“Now Sasha, I want you to—see that man over there, in the fourth row? Yes, sir, you with the blue vest, no don’t stand up it’s alright,” A tech blogger from Gizmodo was pointing at himself in disbelief, his eyes like two blue balloons. “Don’t worry, she’ll come

to you. Sasha, please find that man's phone and bring it to me here." Sasha executed his command, sending laptops and notebooks flying as she pounced into the audience. Screams rang out as she nuzzled into the man's left-front pocket and pulled out his iPhone, snatching it in her teeth and carrying it back onto the stage like a mother cat carrying its newborn kitten by the scruff.

"What an animal, huh? Let's have another big round of applause for Sasha." Only a few people were lucid enough to obey his suggestion. Most of the journalists scanned the ceiling and walls for evidence of some trickery. "One last thing Sasha," she glared at him. "Would you mind returning his iPhone?" The CEO laughed with too much teeth as Sasha executed his command, cradling the reporter's phone delicately, "See, everybody, perfect morality. That's what we do, Sasha, when we find something that doesn't belong to us."

Alongside the domestication process, the award winning design team was tasked with engineering a cage suitable to both the cougar's needs and the consumer's expectations. Some preliminary designs took the shape of a large hamster ball intended to stimulate the cougar's exercise, while other sketches included a pyramidal carbon-fiber structure, a lush pillowed cube, and even a larger, cougar-shaped enclosure. The final concept is a ghost-white exoskeletal enclosure with oblong cylindrical bars and ostensibly simple machinery. At eight-feet wide by ten-feet long, there's more than enough room for the mountain lions' impressive prominence. The cage was to be remotely upgradable with continued updates and support included in the "Puma Package" for only \$19.95 per month. iCage subscriptions were projected to exceed 95% of retail units by the third quarter. Complete with built-in automated food and water

delivery and waste disposal systems, it is quite simply the cage of the future—a cage that could ease tranquility from even the most anxious claustrophobe.

On the marketing team's side of things, the usually simple formula for selling an Apple product had proven fruitless. The team—led by Jansen Johansen, the foremost advertising innovator in the world and the meanest Dane you could ever meet—was more used to marketing products that don't bite. That, coupled with the obviously limited inventory, meant they had to put together an ad campaign that would shock the world into accepting this product as not just a distraction for the elite, but a necessity.

And just like that, the moment has arrived. October 29th, National Cat Day. Those with disposable income have been outside the Apple store for more than eight days hoping they will be one of the first 10 to 20 people in line. This first edition of Mountain Lion is projected to double its resale value in only three months, but this is not why they will be sold out day one. If deemed successful, Apple will begin a breeding program, replenishing California's now-depleted cougar population with a docile supply and affording millions of Americans on waiting lists the ability to purchase their very own second-edition Mountain Lion 2.0.

The commercial begins with a family; normal by any standards, but what they're doing is far from it. They're in the living room. They're all talking with each other. There's not a device to be seen! Is this some preemptive glimpse into time pre-electric or some post-apocalyptic nightmare of technological drought? The father smiles at his son. It's trance-like and bristling with excitement, father and son huddled around something that's enraptured their senses. Laughing and laughing, losing all restrictions, all sense of agency they may have previously possessed, trading elbows and exchanging glances that

induce anticipation. One assumes Apple is merely entering the profitable video game industry or maybe investing in an old-fashioned board game, but the family's cries of pleasure are unnerving, almost salacious, growing unbearable—like an unopened package lying out on the front steps. Jump cut to an abandoned city, grey filter, and a solitary puma strolls through the desolate streets. A child's voice whispers, "From the streets of chaos..." and then it jump cuts back to the turbulent family revealing that the voice belonged to the son whose ecstatic expression breaks from the living-room bedlam and faces the camera head-on, "to the home." They air the same day with a simple tagline, **"Experience the power of nature, from the comfort of the home."** This provocative statement is soon inescapable: TV ads, billboards, posters, the phrase becomes synonymous with Apple's induction into advertising history.

On this day, in stores across America, a select group of 2,324 people have the privilege to welcome a new family member into their homes. A majority of Americans are waking up to the reality that their home does not contain a personalized cougar and iCage—just a sad fern and a bookshelf where an iCage could be. They wish they could experience the same joy that Eric and Judy Fassel are sharing at this very moment, witnessing their only son Timmy, meet his new lifelong companion.

"Timmy, come in here! We'd like you to meet somebody."

Timmy shuffles in, expecting another arranged play date, another pale, leaky-nosed neighborhood kid he'll have to share his Xbox with, another whiny boy he'll have to let win. But tucked in the corner is a giant present, the biggest Timmy has ever seen.

"Woah! What is it?"

“Well son, why don’t you unwrap it and find out.” Eric smiles at them all. Judy; his loving wife, Timmy; his darling son, and Grover; their cherished Pomeranian. Grover, the little cotton ball of a dog, vibrates in place, letting out small borks of glee. Timmy runs across the reflective marble floor of their Tudor Revival living room, nearly tripping over the dog and a coffee table in the process.

“Sweetie, please be careful. You never look where you’re going. Mommy just cleaned the—“

“Honey!” Eric snaps at Judy, “Timmy, open it up.”

Timmy needs no permission to tear into the shimmering wrapping, revealing the cage and cougar within. “Woaaahh!” Timmy’s eyes sparkle as a smile more brilliant than a spotlight sneaks across his face. “A big kitty! Is this a friend for Grover?”

“And for you, sport. This family,” he looks at Judy whose mouth has deformed into a snarl, “has just added another member.”

“Babe, can I speak with you in the kitchen?”

“Of course. Timmy, why don’t you think of a good name for her and introduce her to Grover,” Eric says as Judy pulls him into the kitchen.

“Are you sure we can afford this? I saw what these things cost online, even the most basic model starts at—“

“Not now! Not today!” he says through clenched teeth, “This is for Timmy, okay? For us!”

Meanwhile, they hear Timmy call from the living room, “Mommy! Daddy! Do you know where Grover went?” But they ignore his question.

“Oh yeah, if it’s really for us then why didn’t you tell me, huh? We’re going to have to take out a second mortgage!”

“I see. Now all of a sudden you care about this family’s money. Not last weekend when you spent \$300 at Sephora. Not when I bought you the Benz. Now you do. So, I guess that means you’ll be looking for a job, huh?”

“God damn it Eric, there’s only so much I can take from you” she says, pouring bourbon into a snifter, “I want to know when you do things like this. How long did you stop and think before you pulled the trigger, a day? two? I bet it wasn’t even a day—“

“Oh stop it, you’re embarrassing yourself—“

“I bet it wasn’t even an hour. The second you thought about Timmy, *that’s* when it was set in stone. I swear, that crap about it being a ‘friend for the whole family.’ ”

“And how long do you think you would have lasted without one? I made the purchase. Maybe you haven’t come around to her yet, but C’est La Vie. I knew you’d cave before long. And I heard Drew was getting one for Alice.”

Judy lowers her glass, “Oh really, and how would you know that, did he tell you?”

“Well, maybe I wasn’t just doing this for Timmy after all, huh? I heard he was taking out a loan—don’t know a bank stupid enough to give that dipshit a loan, do you?”

“No,” she smiled, “I don’t. I think I may casually mention our new whatever-its-name-is to her at our next book club meeting.”

“There you go, Honey. I’m glad you’re warming up to her. Trust me honey, she’s state of the art! She’ll be good for the family and she’ll teach Timmy responsibilities.”

“You’re right Eric. I just wish you’d tell me about these things before doing them.”

“From now on, I promise. No more secrets.”

“I love you baby, come here,” she says, smiling and narrowing her eyes.

They kiss and embrace as Eric's legs slide in between Judy's, pushing her up against the marble sink top. As Eric's hand reaches down they hear Timmy shout something from the living room.

"What was that?" Eric yells, pulling his hand up to his face.

"I said she's hugging me! And her claws are so sharp—"

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